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THE VAMPIRE'S WEREWOLF BODYGUARD

TAVIA LARK

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About the Book

Simon doesn't want protection. Especially not from a werewolf.

Too bad the reclusive vampire doesn't have a choice. Simon barely survived an assassin's strike, and he isn't safe yet. The attack left him weak and vulnerable, which is why his meddling sire hires him a bodyguard.

A big, burly werewolf bodyguard.

Cody's instincts make him a formidable guard—if he can control his wolf. Living without a pack or mate makes him unstable. Dangerous. After accidentally shifting on his previous assignment, he has one chance to prove himself:

Protecting a bratty vampire who does *not* want his protection.

Keeping things professional is Cody's only hope. Simon may have four centuries' worth of defensive habits, but Cody can handle difficult clients. Except as Cody digs up the hurt behind Simon's prickly exterior, and Simon starts to enjoy being cared for…

Staying professional might be impossible. Just like controlling Cody's wolf.

The Vampire's Werewolf Bodyguard is an MM paranormal romance with forced proximity, chosen mates, and bickering to lovers. It's adapted from a novella of the same name, originally published under the group pen name Liv Rider.

Content Notes: This book includes blood, violence, and a 400-plus-year age gap.

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Chapter 1

Simon

Simon's stomach aches behind cold ribs. Hopefully centuries of experience hide his nervous yearning. Blood is easy these days. Everything else is harder.

Leaning against the bar, he surveys the eager crowd. Most are human, dressed up in unsubtle black and red. Their warm bodies gyrate beneath ragged death metal shirts, studded leather jackets, or dark Victorian cosplay. Some lace their collars up to their chins. Others leave their throats vulnerable and bare.

"The game has changed," Kimiko says from behind the bar. She must be thinking about the passage of time, too. A common affliction of their kind. "No more lurking in forests or stalking down alleyways. Sometimes I miss a good, romantic alleyway."

Rude of her to interrupt his brooding. Simon fixes her with a withering glare. "An alleyway? Some of us have always had standards."

Kimiko smirks, un-withered. "Some of us have always had fun."

"How exhausting." Simon twirls a finger in his light brown hair. "I'd rather just stand around looking pretty and let the prey approach me first."

"Spoken like a tired old man," Kimiko says, and Simon laughs, his melancholy lifting slightly. Maybe he should get out more often.

A stranger might think Simon was half Kimiko's age. The perils of being gifted at twenty and dressing with the times. Slim and youthful, clad in black jeans and a ghost-gray t-shirt, Simon mostly looks like a college student who doesn't get enough sun.

In reality, Kimiko is less than half *his* age. She's an imposing figure in pastel goth, molded into voluptuous curves by her structured gown. Jet-black hair piles nearly high enough to brush the chandeliers.

Her dress is hardly practical for bartending, but her reflexes are perfect. Besides, two human employees are taking most of the orders. Kimiko is just dabbling—her true role here is as the owner of the Broken Cross. A nightclub, strict on the night part, for thirsty vampires and humans willing to slake that thirst.

Bottled blood is easy to acquire in the modern era, but it only staves off the thirst for so long. Eventually, the craving for living blood grows too powerful. Simon can survive on bottled blood, but he and his unique magic can't thrive on it.

Not that Simon intends to light any fires tonight. His magic tends to make other vampires nervous.

Places like the Broken Cross have turned predation into recreation. Humans can't walk through the door without a background check, because the wider human population still doesn't know paranormals exist. No photos allowed.

Kimiko is one of the few fellow vampires Simon considers a friend. Sometimes, that friendship is inconvenient. "Speaking of old men, have you heard from—"

"No," Simon snaps, and the tide of melancholy rises again.

Kimiko wisely changes the subject. "Are you drinking tonight?"

Simon shrugs, t-shirt slipping off his shoulder. It's baggy enough to conceal anything underneath. "Do any of them fit my criteria?"

Kimiko knows every name that enters her club. "He's looking at you right now."

Plenty of people are looking at Simon, but spotting the human Kimiko means is easy. He stands alone across the room, and his gaze is steady. Almost friendly. Heavy shoulders and a neatly trimmed beard, probably early thirties. A leather jacket that doesn't diminish the aura of affable accountant.

The human holds a glass of clear liquid, and his green wristband indicates his blood is clean. No drugs, no alcohol.

Simon's criteria are simple. No first-timers—he refuses to be someone's first bite. No repeats—he won't feed from the same person twice, because familiarity breeds attachment. And no werewolves, because he isn't fucking stupid.

Werewolves can bite back.

"His name is Lawrence Baird," Kimiko says. "I drank from him three months ago. He's very boring."

"Perfect," Simon says, and holds eye contact with Lawrence. One. Two. Three.

Lawrence sets aside his water glass and circles around the dance floor. Keeping a respectful distance, he asks, "Can I offer you a drink?"

Simple. Direct. Exactly what Simon wants tonight. He should still set expectations. "I'll take a drink. But if you expect anything more, you should find someone else."

Lawrence glances behind Simon's bare shoulder. "That's all I want tonight."

Kimiko gives a theatrical giggle. “Did I wear you out last time, dear human?”

Lawrence remains placid. Friendly. “I’m not an exhibitionist, so I’d prefer not doing this on the dance floor. Your place or mine?”

“Neither.” Simon holds out his hand until Kimiko passes over a melodramatic iron key. An elaborate numeral 3 tag dangles on a chain. Before Kimiko can make some crack about playing safe or using protection, Simon heads for the staircase.

Lawrence follows at a distance, quiet beneath the pulsing music.

The Broken Cross has private rooms for just this purpose. Simon hates inviting strangers into his sanctuary—even Kimiko hasn’t visited his estate. He’s also wary of being vulnerable in someone else’s territory. Forget sunlight and wooden stakes. A vampire’s greatest weakness is carelessness.

That’s what really got his siblings killed.

The downstairs lounge is nearly empty, but the music, if anything, feels louder. The pounding bass isn’t muffled by the press of bodies. Hunger warring with hesitation, Simon leads the way to the third door, close to the emergency exit.

When the door shuts behind them, all sound cuts off.

Kimiko’s flair for the dramatic shrouds the private parlor. Ruby damask papers the walls, and the ornate sofas are pitch black. Even the chandeliers shine red, until Simon flips a switch and the light softens into gold.

The floor is white tile. Easy to ruin and easy to clean.

Simon sets the key on the coffee table without locking the door. Most humans get nervous when they feel trapped. Some humans like feeling nervousness, but Simon prefers his snacks calm. “A question before we start. Why are you doing this?”

Lawrence doesn’t appear nervous at all. He drapes his leather jacket over the sofa arm. “I always thought vampires were hot,” he says without embarrassment. “I might get hard while you drink. Will that be a problem?”

The plain honesty is refreshing. Most humans are either blushing or leering at this point, if they’re in this for sexual reasons.

“Just keep your hands to yourself.” Simon gestures to the sofa. “Sit down.”

Lawrence sits, lifting his chin. “I prefer the throat, if I have a choice. I use my hands for work.”

Simon hesitates. He always heals the wound after drinking, and the throat is an intimate place. But Lawrence has been so accommodating. This is a simple favor. “The throat is fine. Hold still.”

Lawrence spreads his hands flat on his thighs and waits obediently. The mild scent of leather and sweat fills Simon's nose. Bracing one knee on the cushion, he tugs Lawrence's collar aside. Closer to the shoulder is safer than the throat itself.

Biting is an instinct, passed through millennia from the makers to the made. As Simon leans in, his fangs lengthen to pierce Lawrence's flesh. Lips and tongue seal to the punctures, and swallowing is a reflex. Simon can't stop himself, even as shock cascades down his throat.

Something's wrong with the blood.

Bitterness floods Simon's mouth, and he violently disengages. His fangs wrench a gaping wound into Lawrence's shoulder. Blood-drinking best practices aren't important when Lawrence twists, grabbing something from his jacket.

Metal flashes, but Simon moves with the shadow-gift's speed. He's across the parlor before Lawrence stands up.

A long, serrated knife rests in the human's hand. The sort of knife that could saw through someone's neck. Apparently, the Broken Cross's security measures need an upgrade. That knife shouldn't have made it through the front door—and this hunter shouldn't have passed the background check.

"How inconsiderate," Simon says. "Kimiko will be furious about the paperwork."

Twenty feet of white tile stretch between them. Heedless of the blood pulsing from his shoulder, Lawrence lifts the knife. A scowl twists his friendly features. His silence is unnerving, and he doesn't move. As if he's realized how useless this is.

Lawrence might have fifty pounds on Simon, but with just a knife, that advantage is useless. A gun would have been the smarter choice, with a silver bullet to slow Simon down. But a knife? Simon's too old, too fast, too strong. He could dash across the room and finish ripping Lawrence's throat out before Lawrence could blink. He could fling a blaze of magic without even moving.

As soon as his stomach stops churning.

Simon's thoughts muddle together, and bitterness still recoils against his tongue. "Are you just going to stand there?"

"Yeah, Simon," Lawrence says, strangely calm. "I think I will."

Simon's slow pulse falters. "I never told you my name."

His own words echo, and the room darkens at the edges. The limits of his own body become brutally clear. The flames won't answer his call.

There's something wrong with Lawrence's blood, and as it seeps

into Simon, that wrongness seeps in, too. The hunter won't have to fight him. Soon, Simon will be weak as the day he was made.

Simon barely keeps his feet. He has only moments before he passes out. "Did you kill Tania?"

"I don't know who the fuck that is," Lawrence answers, his pulse unchanging.

The timeline doesn't quite add up either. Lawrence would have been too young. He's probably telling the truth.

"Pity." Simon trembles with cold nausea. Maybe half a minute left. Make it count. "This would be much more satisfying if you had."

From beneath his baggy t-shirt, Simon draws his pistol.

By the time Lawrence's eyes widen, Simon's finger is already tight on the trigger. The bullet has already punched through Lawrence's chest.

Silver bullets might slow vampires and werewolves down, but plain lead is good enough for humans.

The shot saps the last of Simon's strength. He sinks to his knees as Lawrence's lifeless body topples. Fuck. Simon hasn't felt this weak since the night Dima granted him the shadow-gift. Just like tonight, the strength had faded from his limbs, and darkness had swept through his slowing thoughts.

Unlike tonight, Simon hadn't been alone.

Simon releases the gun with a shaking hand. Nobody has burst through the door yet, which means nobody heard the shot. Painfully, Simon pulls his phone from his back pocket.

Calling Kimiko would be the smart move. But Simon isn't smart right now. He's too weak and lonely to resist his own worst impulses, and he dials a number that hasn't replied in years.

The line immediately connects to voicemail, where a cold recorded voice says, "Speak."

Simon swallows down the bitter poison. "I need help," he whispers.

Then he hangs up before consciousness leaves him.

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Chapter 2

Cody

Waking up naked in the company basement is a terrible habit. Cody Weston scrunches his face against the torn-up carpet. His features are flat and human again. His fingers are blunt, clawless, raking through his hair. Every sense is muffled. But echoes of the wolf ache through his entire body.

The same pain as every time he shifts out of control.

"Fuck," Cody mutters, his throat sore from snarling. The pain is tolerable. The gap in his memory is not.

He's woken up in this basement room before. Padded walls, perfect soundproofing, a prototype security door Tobias got cheap because he knows a guy. The only furniture is a wooden bed frame and a mattress that gets replaced whenever Cody shreds it too badly.

Cody's the reason Tobias set this room up in the first place. But last night was still the night before the full moon. Cody should have been safe.

Which is why he'd been on a job when the wolf took over.

Involuntary shifts are different from normal shifts. He can't communicate with other people as a wolf either way—not unless they're his pack or mate, and Cody has neither. But at least during normal shifts, Cody keeps his mind and remembers everything.

Cody shoves to his feet, body stiff and mind racing with too few clues. He clearly made it back to Atwood Security bodyguard agency, and nobody shot him up with silver. So, he must not have lost his shit completely.

He must not have hurt anyone.

Relief is tempting, but guilt and uncertainty still tangle around his guts. Cody won't know what really happened until he talks to Tobias. The prospect fills him with a more selfish dread. He promised when Tobias hired him that the werewolf thing wouldn't be a problem if they took precautions. He could cope without having a pack.

This sure as fuck doesn't look like coping.

Next to the door, a plexiglass box is set into the wall. A clear pane

displays the folded clothes inside, latched shut with a complicated puzzle lock. Bold red letters on the pane read: *In case of emergency, use opposable thumbs*.

One of the few areas in which Cody's human form can beat his wolf.

Cody unlocks the box, then drags on the sweatpants and sweatshirt. They're loose and comfortable, even though he's put on muscle since he started working for Atwood. No mirrors in the cell, so he slides on the flip-flops and grabs the last item in the emergency box—the key.

Thin light and quiet mechanical noises fill the building. Cody doesn't see anyone until he passes the janitor on the third floor. He forces a smile and waves, which must not look too deranged because she waves back.

"Is Tobias in?" Cody asks.

"He was here when I clocked in." She sighs, and her gaze speaks uncomplimentary volumes about Cody's rumpled clothes and scruffy jaw. "You both need to stop sleeping at the office. It isn't good for you."

"Working on it," Cody says cheerfully.

His smile falls away as he knocks on Tobias's door. No need to announce himself—the hallway cameras will tell Tobias exactly who's knocking.

The lock clicks. Cody enters the office and closes the door behind him.

Even without Cody's werewolf senses, this office belongs unmistakably to Tobias Atwood. Gadgets and prototypes gleam from all the shelves. His professional credentials hang from one wall—next to three certificates for second place in the company foosball tournament. And Princess's obedience school diploma.

Two framed photos sit on the desk. Cody can't see them from this angle, but he knows one is Tobias's wife, Aditi. The other is their snow-white Pomeranian, Princess.

Tobias himself sits behind his desk, cradling a steaming mug that smells like his usual black coffee. "I'd make a joke about the wolf dragging something in, but it's too early for jokes. Sit the fuck down."

Cody sits across the desk. The chair's built for clients, who usually don't have Cody's bulk, and it makes him feel monstrous. Like a caged animal.

His phone and wristwatch sit on the desk, the watch's wristband snapped.

An apology knocks against his teeth, but Cody bites it back. He

needs to know what he's apologizing for first. "Last thing I remember is escorting the client through the parking lot. I heard something in the bushes. What happened after that?"

Tobias pushes his laptop aside, giving Cody his full attention. He's only twenty-eight, same as Cody, but usually he has a boyish smile he has to tone down so clients take him seriously. Today, he looks every year and then some. He owns a business he built from the ground up. He and Aditi are expecting their first kid.

And he doesn't want his out-of-control werewolf friend to ruin everything.

"What happened is you got lucky," Tobias says. "The guy in the bushes really was a corporate saboteur, not some innocent socialite throwing up her cocktails."

Cody doesn't relax. "Was anyone hurt?"

Tobias doesn't remark on the cowardly passive voice. "Nobody's hurt. You weren't violent, and you got into the van easily when I arrived. You were just a fucking wolf when you shouldn't have been."

The night before the full moon. Cody's never lost control this early.

"What about the client?" Cody asks.

"She already knew about werewolves, which makes the cover-up easier. Like I said, lucky." Tobias's stern expression dissolves into a smirk. "The client seemed to find the whole thing thrilling. She asked for your number."

"Fucking hell," Cody groans, slumping back. The chair creaks under him. That all sounds as good as it could have gone, but he doesn't feel any better. Next time, he might not get lucky.

All the possible solutions feel like stopgaps. Locking himself in the holding cell earlier in the month. Finding a witch he can trust enough to sedate him without poisoning him. Nothing will change the fact that he's a werewolf without a pack or mate, and eventually, it will drive him insane.

Cody once thought Atwood Security could be a new family. Protecting people makes him feel worthwhile. But it's not enough. Tobias is a good friend. The only friend Cody trusted about the werewolf thing in college, and Cody's only friend left after his pack kicked him out. But Tobias has his own family. Cody can't keep relying on him.

"This can't happen again," Cody says. "Are you firing me, or do I need to quit?"

Tobias should be relieved Cody brought it up first. Instead, he rolls his eyes. "You fucking wish you could quit." Tobias taps his laptop, and Cody's phone lights up with an incoming email. "Your new job

starts in three days."

After the full moon. Cody should be stable again, but he doesn't trust himself. Tobias shouldn't trust him, either.

"That's a bad idea. Send someone else."

"I can't send anyone else." Tobias sends him another email. "This client is less human than our usual demographic."

Cody straightens up reflexively. He's seen a lot on the job, but this is new. Explains why Cody didn't find a letter of termination in the Opposable Thumbs Emergency Box.

No, Tobias is too stubborn for that. There would be a probation period. A performance improvement plan, trying to management-best-practices the uncontrolled werewolf out of him. Only when everything failed would Tobias admit that his friendship with Cody was a sunk cost he needed to cut loose.

This job changes things, though. Cody is the only nonhuman at Atwood Security. As far as he knows, none of his coworkers are aware of the paranormal. If a werewolf needs a guard, Cody's the only possible choice.

"What does a werewolf need a bodyguard for?" Cody asks. Pack feuds get ugly, and grudges run deep as the moon's pull. But outcasts like Cody are rare. Wolves protect their own, and hiring outside help feels more like invasion than protection.

"Irrelevant," Tobias says. "The client isn't a werewolf either."

Cody's confusion melts into dread. Fuck. This isn't just a bad idea. It's a disaster.

He hates vampires as much as the next werewolf. The treaty between vampires, werewolves, witches, and hunters has been in place for seventy years, but that can't erase centuries of conflict. Vampires are always the ones picking at the tattered edges. They survive by doing exactly what Cody is desperate to avoid—feeding on humans. Antisocial predators, incapable of keeping each other in order, even as they argue for harsher restrictions on werewolves.

Plus, they're old and snobby as fuck. Not great for Cody's control issues. Either he'll rip the vampire's throat out, or the vampire will rip out his.

"I can't work with a vampire." If Cody were a wolf right now, his fur would be bristling. "I'm sorry, I just can't."

"Too fucking bad," Tobias says bluntly. "Your job is to protect Simon Caley. The client is his… sire? That's what they call it, right?"

"Right."

"Freaky shit. Anyway, the sire's sparing no expense. Full security tech install, plus a rush rate for your services." Tobias leans forward,

grim. “I’m going to be honest because we’re friends. Normally, there’s no way I’d take this contract. But I need this money if I’m covering up last night’s… incident.”

Cody exhales. The word ‘if’ carries the threat.

He can’t handle this mess on his own. A pack would help him, no questions asked, but however good their friendship is, Tobias isn’t pack.

“Understood, boss,” Cody says, using the title to wedge some distance between them. Even if it hurts a little, how relieved Tobias looks. “I’m in.”

Two hours later, after he’s showered and eaten, Cody starts reviewing the files. With every detail, his inner wolf snarls like alarm bells. An assassination attempt two nights ago? Unknown culprit and active threat? No communication with law enforcement? Cody should have rejected the assignment, and fuck the consequences.

Because this job is a house of cards, and Cody is a ticking time bomb.

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Chapter 3

Simon

Simon wakes safe in his own coffin—a troubling development. Familiar velvet cushioning surrounds him, and the carved underside of the lid is within reach. In the pitch darkness, Simon traces the telltale abstract patterns identifying the space as his.

Someone brought him home. The list of suspects is short.

Simon flips the switch to unlock the coffin, then pushes. The lid is heavier than usual; Simon has to flatten both palms against the wood to gain leverage. He expects whatever weighs the lid down to crash to the ground, but there's nothing.

The lid isn't heavy; Simon is weak. The poison hasn't worn off.

His underground chamber is just as dark as the coffin's interior. Sitting upright, Simon has to clutch the edge of the coffin for balance. Dizziness spins through him, embers of memory lighting in its wake.

Simon remembers drinking poisoned blood. Killing the human. Calling his sire—how fucking pathetic. Simon briefly woke to Kimiko tucking him into a spare coffin, cursing vividly in three different languages. Unfortunate. That will cancel out one of the favors she owes him.

Darkness. Movement. Fever. Thrashing against coffin walls.

"Stop that," a voice had said. The words might have been a fragment of his own broken thoughts, but Simon still instinctively obeyed Dima.

Except Simon senses the house above him isn't empty. The space has been disturbed. A heady blend of hope-want-fear strikes just as dizzyingly as the poison.

Who else could have brought Simon home? Kimiko has never been invited in.

He concentrates on the sconces framing the chamber door, but the wicks remain cold. Simon's power barely stirs within him. He must not have swallowed enough blood to fuel it.

Climbing from his coffin is manageable, as long as Simon moves carefully. He pauses, hand on the wall for balance. Thankfully, he's

not in his favorite pajamas—that would be embarrassing. He's wearing the same clothes as he wore to the Broken Cross, and his boots wait near the door. His phone turns up in the coffin, its screen showing an almost-dead battery and a flurry of messages from Kimiko's assistant. The time is nearly two in the morning.

Three nights after the attack.

Simon leaves the boots and walks on slow, silent feet to find his maker. Shadows melt away as he reaches the living quarters. The first level is still underground but decorated. Comfortable. Not medieval prison-chic like the coffin chamber. Simon has spent the past thirty years crafting this estate into his solitary home.

He finds his sire on the first floor above ground, in one of the libraries. Dima stands next to the record player, looking up at the mural that stretches above the shelves. Painted birds and butterflies dance from flower to tree, encircling the library in a sunlit garden. Beneath the bright colors, Dima is a statue of winter.

"Are you ever going to finish it?" Dima asks without moving.

As always, his voice drags Simon centuries into the past. Back when he was newly fledged, struggling to control his instincts, please his sire, and retain some semblance of self. Controlling his instincts used to be harder. Pleasing Dima used to be easier.

Sire is a term of respect, not parentage, among vampires. Dima is Simon's lord and creator. That bond persists even if their other bonds fade away.

There are gaps in the mural. Meadowgrass fades into patches of blank whitewash, where Simon intended to add people. Only he's never decided what or who to add. Maybe it's already finished with the blank spaces.

"Twenty years," Simon says quietly. "Why return now?"

"You needed me." Dima moves, shadows seeming to gather in his wake. He towers over Simon, and concern softens his face. "My little firebird, you look dreadful."

Dima touches Simon's chin. Familiar power wavers in Simon's blood, his shadow-gift recognizing his creator. For a moment, everything is as it was. Simon's glorious first decades as Dima's fledgling. They shared a coffin. Dima taught him to hunt, then kissed the blood from his lips. Simon was new and special and treasured—not pathetic and needy.

Aside from his modern suit, the centuries haven't changed Dima. His skin is paper-white, and his lank blond hair falls to his shoulders. If his eyes ever had color, they faded with the centuries. Dima is the oldest vampire Simon knows, already a folktale by the time he made

Simon. Well over a thousand, according to the earliest records.

Simon is Dima's last remaining fledgling. Some died before Simon was born. Rebecca didn't survive her fledgling years. Tania was murdered, Francisco worse than murdered.

Some people draw closer in grief. Others grow distant.

"Where have you been?" Simon asks.

"Twenty years, you say?" Dima tilts his head, like the shift of light over stone. "That's but a moment. Don't be impatient. You're not a fledgling anymore."

Simon doesn't flinch. That would make him look even more like a fledgling. "Sorry."

Dima softens, echoing old emotions like concern. "Sit down. You shouldn't be out of your coffin like this."

Simon perches on one of the plush reading chairs. He's even slower than he usually feels with Dima. He can't keep up with the rapid shifts from scolding to affection. But Dima's words don't matter as much as his actions. Simon called, and Dima came. That truth burrows beneath Simon's cold heart.

"You were right to call me," Dima says. "I don't even recognize the poison the hunter afflicted you with. Did he say anything about his allegiance?"

Simon shakes his head.

"I assumed not." Dima sounds direct. Businesslike. "I've already handled the cover-up. Kimiko was happy to help. Not happy to see me, of course. I do hope she owes you a favor, or you'll owe her. For now, nobody besides Kimiko, her assistants, and me knows you killed a human."

"I don't need to cover it up," Simon says, trying to focus through his dizziness. "Self-defense is permitted under the treaty."

"Of course, little firebird," Dima soothes. "But there's no rush to confess. I want to pursue my own investigation before stirring up malcontents. Treaty criticism is at a high, you know."

Simon winces. A man is dead, and worrying about optics is unseemly. The optics are bad, though. "I didn't think you cared about the treaty."

"You care," Dima says, as if honoring Simon's concerns is obvious. Easy. As if Dima hadn't disappeared for the last twenty years. "Trust me. We won't hide the incident forever—just long enough to gather some evidence." His voice hardens. "They dared to hurt my fledgling. I will resolve this."

Simon's cold heart clenches. Both of them must be thinking of another moment, yet unresolved. Twenty years ago, Tania was

murdered by a human hunter. The killer was never caught, and a faction of vampires nearly shattered the treaty over it.

The new attack could be a coincidence. Or a second chance.

But Simon doesn't want a resolution tonight. He'd rather have Dima stay, at least a month, and he can't help asking, "Does that mean you're leaving?"

"Don't worry, I won't leave you alone in this condition." Dima smiles—but Simon's foolish hope is short-lived. "I've hired a bodyguard to protect you in my absence. He'll arrive in three nights, along with a team to install your new security system."

Exhaustion blunts Simon's panic into unease. The last thing he wants is strangers infiltrating his home. "I don't need a bodyguard. I can protect myself."

"Yes, you're very good with a firearm, apparently," Dima says indulgently. "But how long has it been since you drank live blood? Can you muster even a spark of magic right now?"

Simon's silence is answer enough.

"You aren't to leave the house until this matter is settled." Dima crosses the distance in a shadowed instant, just to pat Simon on the hand. "Back to your coffin, firebird. We'll discuss whether you need a bodyguard tomorrow night."

The words stop short of using Dima's full mental force—but Dima won't hesitate to use it if he sees the need. Dima can enthrall a dozen humans with scarcely a thought. Fellow paranormals are more difficult targets, but the sire-bond gives him an easy channel into Simon's mind.

While Simon still has the illusion of a choice, he acquiesces.

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Simon should have known Dima was just coaxing him to bed. The only discussion that happens over the next three nights is Dima dodging Simon's protests. As they wait in the parlor for the interloper to arrive, Simon makes one last attempt.

"I don't need a bodyguard." Simon means to sound firm but veers closer to petulant.

Calling Dima was a mistake. That becomes clearer as the dizziness wears away, leaving only weakness. Handling this attack would have been simpler without Dima's interference.

"Agree to disagree on that, my dear." Dima sits on Simon's chaise lounge like it's a throne. Even idly scrolling his phone in one hand, he looks like an ancient statue.

And Simon is a flickering flame, trapped in a lantern glass. "I'm the

one still standing. Perhaps you should hire a bodyguard for the local hunters' guild. They need it more than I do."

Dima just looks up, bored and implacable.

Arguing is pointless.

Simon sits on the edge of his coffee table. His gaze falls to a lump in the carpet and scattered dust near the wall. Signs of the new security system, cameras at every door and sensors at every outer wall. The Atwood Security installers came while Simon was oversleeping. Dima offered to lure one down for Simon to feed, but Simon refused. The poor Atwood employees were just doing their job, and apparently only the boss and Simon's new bodyguard know about vampires.

Preposterous. How can a group of humans protect Simon?

Except the worst part is that Dima may be right. Simon's limbs still shake when he moves too quickly, and he's too lightheaded to concentrate on the debate. The poison must have a witchcraft component, to linger like this. If he's attacked again, Simon isn't sure he'll be able to pull a trigger fast enough.

He shouldn't need to, though. Simon doesn't intend to let any more strangers into his home, and the new technology will help. If a blade of grass is disturbed on the property, Simon will know.

The doorbell rings.

"That must be him," Dima says without moving. "Shall I get the door?"

Simon shakes his head. "I'll let him in."

He wants the first look at his unwanted bodyguard, to see what he's dealing with.

Maybe it won't be so bad, Simon considers as he leaves the parlor. He can shut off the rooms he prefers, and the human will be awake during daytime, anyway. They won't have to see each other. Just like having the housekeepers and landscapers visit.

Maybe it's just the idea of weakness that rankles. Or Simon's childish wish for Dima to stay instead.

A new touchscreen panel sits next to the front door. The marble floor beneath is cleaner than the rest of the foyer, where the Atwood installers must have swept. Simon taps the code to disarm the system, then opens the physical door.

And stares.

The man on the doorstep is large. Half a foot taller than Simon and at least twice as broad. His build screams of natural gift combined with dedication—bulking up easily, but working at it, too. Simon, frozen in time for centuries, could never transform himself like that.

Simon's second, stupider thought is that this is the sort of man he would have lured into the shadows when he was younger. A tumble and a sip of blood. Sun-warmed skin, dark eyes, square jaw with just a shadow of stubble. The man's hair would be brown in better lighting; caught between the house lights and the moon, it looks black.

There's a barely contained primal quality to his movements, which makes sense. A pungent scent shatters any hope of tolerating this bodyguard.

Simon's hand tenses on the doorknob. His teeth, by dint of tremendous self-control, don't lengthen. "Dima," he says, glaring at the threat. "You neglected to tell me you hired a werewolf."

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Chapter 4

Cody

Sometimes, Cody hates being right. Five seconds in and this job is already a disaster. Judging by his glare, the anemic twink in the doorway agrees.

"You must be Simon." Cody holds out a hand, clinging to professional niceties. Exhaustion grates behind his eyes, and he wants to just grab his bags and turn around. But he has a fucking job to do. "Is my species going to be a problem?"

Simon ignores the hand. His stillness is at odds with the softness of his pale complexion, the light brown hair brushing his throat. He doesn't look a day over twenty. The chandelier above frames him like a halo—but the cold scent of death is anything but angelic.

Nothing about Simon looks like someone who needs a bodyguard.

His blatant distaste for the situation is almost funny. Almost. Guarding a vampire is already a disaster. A defiant vampire will be impossible.

"Not a problem at all." Simon's tone turns polite. Almost friendly. "Because you're not staying. There seems to have been a mistake."

"Simon," a voice calls from another room.

That must be the sire. Simon's hand whitens on the doorknob, so tight Cody's surprised the metal doesn't bend. Defiance still sharpens his glare, but he acquiesces like a wolf obeying his alpha's growl.

"Fine," Simon says coolly. "Wipe your shoes."

Cody takes a deep breath to settle himself, bristling with awareness of Simon's gaze. He doesn't have much patience for asshole vampires at his best, and this definitely isn't his best. The full moon is barely past. Cody spent the past few days on mission prep with Tobias before flying over. Private flight, of course. His bags would never get through security. Still more people than Cody wants to interact after the full moon.

But Cody has to prove his self-control to Tobias—and to himself. He wipes his shoes on the mat without complaint, hefts his bags, and enters the vampire's lair. Instinct snarls silently as Simon locks the door behind him.

“This way,” Simon says. He doesn’t move as quickly as Cody expects from a vampire. Maybe he’s slowing down on purpose.

Their destination is down the hall, past the spacious foyer. Cody pays close attention, comparing everything to the blueprint he studied with Tobias. The few windows are boarded up, which is good from a security standpoint. New Atwood cameras and alarms glitter in various corners, and there should be more out of sight.

When the cab had pulled up to the front gate, Cody’s first glimpse of the property confirmed many of his fears. Some vampires are tolerable. The ones that get over themselves and adapt to modern life. Simon, however, lives forty-five minutes outside the suburbs. The mansion backs onto deep private woods, and the nearest neighbor is out of sight.

Cody isn’t sure whether the lack of neighbors is a good or bad sign.

The parlor is brightly lit and eclectic. Still lifes and empty frames decorate the walls, and modern lamps clash with the old velvet furniture. Cody’s attention zeroes in on the second vampire, unfolding from the low couch.

This one makes Simon look practically cuddly. Dima rises with dangerous grace, every element of his body in effortless alignment. He smells more of dust than death. Cody’s wolf stirs at the dry scent, and he has to bite back a defensive growl. Fuck. Hopefully his face doesn’t show the strain of forcing himself down.

Simon glares poisonously between them, then takes the vacated couch.

“Hello, sir.” Cody shifts his bags to one hand, then decides against attempting a handshake this time.

Dima’s face comes alive with his smile. “Thank you for coming. I knew Tobias would deliver. Please, set those down.”

If Cody didn’t know better, he would think this was Dima’s house, not Simon’s. He sets the heavy duffels down. One holds mostly clothes, the other mostly weaponry. He has a license for almost all of it. The rest, they don’t make licenses for. Paranormal jobs call for paranormal measures.

“You know Tobias?” Cody asks.

“By reputation,” Dima says. “I don’t know yours, though, beyond your… lupine nature. For obvious reasons, I need a fellow nonhuman to guard my fledgling.”

Fledgling. Vampires are fucking weird. Simon drapes one arm over the back of the couch. He looks poised to stab someone at any moment. Zero resemblance to a baby bird.

But Dima is the one paying Atwood, so Cody shouldn’t mention

how fucking weird vampires are. “I’m Cody Weston, and I’ve been with Atwood for four years. Did Tobias forward my credentials?”

Dima waves a hand. “Yes, yes. Tell me more about the important things, though, before I leave my fledgling in your care. Do you have a pack?”

Cody can’t help tensing. His answer is a hell of a red flag. “No, sir.”

“That’s good,” Dima says to Cody’s surprise. “No conflict of loyalty.”

Ha. No, obeying his pack has never been Cody’s problem.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to survey the house and confirm protocols with Simon,” Cody says. Changing the subject might be rude, but he isn’t here for small talk, and definitely not small talk about himself.

His terseness prompts a wide smile from Dima. The pointed canines wouldn’t draw a second glance if someone didn’t know the signs. “Straight to business. I respect that. My own business requires attention, too, so I’ll leave you to get started. Simon.”

Simon glances up, expressionless.

The air blurs, and Cody instinctively braces to move. But there’s no attack, just Dima suddenly standing in front of Simon. Bone-white fingers trail down Simon’s cheek.

“Do as the nice wolf says,” Dima orders. His voice, still warm, has an edge. “Don’t let your pride lead you into peril.”

“You’re one to speak of pride,” Simon answers softly.

Centuries of emotion echo behind the touch. Like he’s intruding, Cody looks away. He doesn’t like someone touching his new principal without warning, but this is none of his fucking business.

The air blurs again, and Dima is gone. The front door clicks shut, and Cody’s keen ears pick up the security system humming into place.

Simon looks over. The movement shifts honey-brown hair across his temple. Despite his apparent youth, his gaze is cold, ancient, a predator assessing a rival beast. “Let’s get things straight, wolf.” Simon swings to his feet. “I neither want nor need a babysitter.”

Five foot eight tops, he has to lift his chin to glare at Cody.

For the first time since arriving, Cody finds himself on even footing. The job makes sense. Simon isn’t a baby bird—he’s a spoiled brat. The centuries don’t matter. Cody’s familiar with the stubborn lips, the eyebrows knit into a dare. He’s worked with recalcitrant charges before. Simon is testing him, and Cody isn’t going to break.

Cody hooks his thumbs into his pockets, body language open and relaxed. Unthreatening but unshakeable. “I believe you. Looks like you have one anyway.”

“And if I’m not wrong,” Simon continues, in the voice of one who knows he isn’t wrong, “you don’t want to be here either.”

“I want to do my job,” Cody says. “The more you cooperate, the less I’ll bother you. The more you get in my way, the more I’ll be in your way. Understood?”

Simon’s hard to read, what with the barely breathing thing. Enough air to talk, and not a breath more. “Staying out of my way sounds perfect.”

Grudging agreement is a start. “Great. Now, can you walk me through the attack?”

He’d gotten barebone details from Tobias. The client hadn’t provided much. An attack by a human, suspected to be a hunter, who didn’t survive. Which frankly sounds suspicious as fuck—but if a vampire murders a human, there are better cover-ups than hiring a werewolf bodyguard.

Simon points at a chair. Cody sits, trying not to feel like a dog doing tricks. Simon returns to the couch, but perches on the rolled arm instead of the seat.

“I was at a friend’s club, looking for someone to drink from,” Simon starts. His pale fingers are stark against the velvet. “I found a man named Lawrence Baird—or he found me. My friend says he was staring at me all night before I beckoned him over.”

That’s alarming. Interest lifts Cody’s exhaustion. “You think this was premeditated.”

Simon pauses before answering. “Premeditated, but not personal. Lawrence wanted to kill a vampire, and I was unlucky. I opened a private room, then began to drink from him. But the blood was… wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Cody asks. The briefing hadn’t mentioned this.

“He’d drugged himself with something that poisoned me, leaving me weakened,” Simon says, then hastily adds, “Temporarily weakened. I’ve since recovered. Lawrence had a hunting knife, but I shot him in the head before he could saw off mine.”

Cody’s gaze drops, but there’s no sign of a holster on Simon now. “Do you always carry a gun?”

“Often. Is that a problem?”

“No, just tell me when you’re carrying, if it’s not obvious,” Cody says. “I need to know how many weapons are involved in the situation.”

Simon laughs with mocking warmth. “You’ve been fraternizing with humans too much, wolf. We *are* the weapons.”

Cody bristles at the word ‘fraternizing’ but forces down his anger. Not very well—Simon’s smile stiffens, as if noticing Cody’s tension. The bloodless brat is observant.

“Dima is handling the investigation into Lawrence,” Simon continues. “You’re just here to annoy me, apparently.”

“I’m here to protect you,” Cody says firmly. “Whether you want me to or not. Dima hired me, and I’m not cheap. That means he has reason to believe this isn’t random, and any information you have will help me do my job.” When Simon remains quiet, Cody continues. “But I’ll be honest—I’m not a detective. I’m trained to prevent known threats and react to surprises. That’s it. I’m keeping you safe, not solving the case.”

Simon shrugs. “Like I said, Dima is handling the investigation.”

Maybe Cody’s imagining Simon’s air of resentment. Probably not. He doesn’t like the way Dima surprised Simon with a werewolf at his door. Dick move.

Then again, Dima may have a lot on his plate. A hunter planning to kill a vampire, staking out a blood club? That’s dangerous treaty-related shit, well above Cody’s paygrade.

“Normally in an active threat situation, we would have an entire team out here,” Cody says. “Not just one guy.”

“Don’t think you can handle it?” Simon asks, fake sweet.

Cody leans back in his chair. “Werewolves sleep too. But Atwood Security was short on paranormals, so I’m the team this time. Luckily, your new security system is higher tech than we’re supposed to be capable of. You’re safe here, even when I’m sleeping, and I’ll accompany you any time you leave the house.”

Simon is silent for so long, Cody braces himself for an argument. But Simon’s eventual question is simple. “Is that all?”

“We should review some other protocols,” Cody says. “I won’t tell you to do much. But if I say something, then do it. No questions asked, even if it doesn’t make sense right then. You can always yell at me later.”

“I look forward to that.”

Cody bets he does. “I also want to review your daily routine. And do you have a phone? I want to add a panic button.”

“Sure,” Simon says brightly. “Tomorrow night. I’m busy now, but you can play with my phone and review protocols to your heart’s content tomorrow night.”

“Now would be better,” Cody tries.

“Either I’m safe here with your fancy security system, or I’m not.” Simon waves his hand, an echo of his sire’s dismissal. “Tomorrow

night.”

Fine. Cody knows how to pick his battles. This isn’t one he wants to fight with the full moon hangover pounding his bones. There are other settling-in procedures he can handle tonight. “That’s fine. I should inspect the system. Do you want to show me around, or should I explore on my own?”

Searching would be more efficient without the vampire lurking nearby. But principals sometimes get jumpy about Cody poking around unsupervised, at least for the first few days. By the time Cody settles in, he’s invisible unless he’s needed.

As expected, Simon straightens up. “I’ll give you a tour,” he says, and hops from the couch.

But once standing, his face whitens even further. His blue-green eyes go blank—before rolling back.

Lunging forward, Cody catches Simon as he falls. His charge’s body is cold and light, featherweight bones in his arms. Cody lays Simon out on the ground, careful to stabilize his neck.

Training and instinct drive each thought at breakneck speed. Cody puts two fingers to Simon’s wrist, and his heart sinks when he doesn’t feel a pulse. Simon is cold, not breathing—

Right.

Rationality kicks in. Simon is a vampire. He’s supposed to be cold. His pulse is supposed to be slow.

And he’s a sneaky little liar. Looks like that poison wasn’t so temporary after all.

“Hey, Simon,” Cody says soothingly, pressing two fingers beneath Simon’s jaw. Maybe he can catch a pulse there. “Can you hear me?”

One faint beat against his fingertips. A moment of relief.

Then Simon’s eyes fly open, and he claws at Cody’s face.

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Chapter 5

Simon

Instinctive alarm slashes through the darkness. Simon lashes out, only for heavy hands to catch his wrists. He twists, teeth bared, but can't break free—too weak to even try again. He's as dizzy as he was when the poison first struck, and the werewolf has him trapped, helpless on the floor.

Is this how Francisco felt, three centuries ago?

"Shit," Cody hisses, tightening his grip. But his next words are soothing. "Easy there, Simon, it's me."

Like that's supposed to be reassuring. Simon falls limp, staring up into the looming werewolf's face, and drags his fear back into the shadows of his mind. He can't be afraid. He can't. Thankfully Dima isn't here to see how pathetic he is.

Cody's eyes are dark brown. His hands around Simon's wrists are unbearably warm.

"Get your paws off me," Simon says coldly.

Cody doesn't move. "Are you going to claw my eyes out?"

Simon lifts his chin. "I'm not the one with claws."

The widening of Cody's eyes is barely perceptible. Then he glances down at his fingernails, dark and sharp. They haven't met Simon's skin, but they're clearly shifted. The heightened thud of Cody's pulse is palpable where his palms meet Simon's wrists.

Cody's jaw tenses, and his claws retract into blunt fingernails.

"Sorry about that." Cody's rapid pulse doesn't show in his voice. He releases Simon, then offers a hand. "Let me help you up."

Simon shoves himself upright—carefully. Slowly. The world sways, but he makes it to the chaise lounge under his own power.

Cody crouches in front of him, giving him space while examining him intently. Like Cody's really here to protect Simon. There's a naïve youthfulness to his concern. Maybe he's from a new, modern pack, where they don't teach the reason vampires should hate werewolves.

Leaning elbows on knees, Simon stares at the floor until the dizziness passes. He needs to compose himself.

“Are you all right?” Cody asks—a normal question that makes Simon want to claw his eyes out after all.

Simon wishes he could turn into a swarm of bats and fly away like Tania could. Much better talent than lighting candles. “Here’s some protocol for you, wolf. You will not touch me.”

Cody’s jaw tenses again. Good. Simon would rather act rude than scared.

“Trust me, I don’t want to touch you,” Cody says. “But I might have to as part of my job, and I won’t always be able to ask permission first.”

“You won’t get my forgiveness.”

“Thankfully not part of my compensation package.” Cody stands up slowly and takes a step back. More considerate space. His heartbeat is rapid, but none of the adrenaline bleeds into his voice. “Now, help me do my job. Was that the poison or something else?”

This would be better if Cody were human. Simon feels overexposed, wondering how well Cody can observe him. “That was the poison. I’ll be fine once it’s burned off, but for the next few days, I’ll be… compromised.”

Simon sure hopes it will just be a few days.

He expects annoyance or concern or a predator’s interest in weakness. But Cody just nods. His assessment is professional now. Neutral. “Okay. Just tell me next time you’re about to fall over.”

“I’ll consider it.” Simon stands up, more carefully this time. “I’ll show you your room, then you can explore the rest of the house by yourself. Top three floors only.”

“You’ve got it,” Cody says, and scoops up his duffel bags.

Simon decides where Cody should sleep as he walks. Suggesting a kennel would be funny, but more immature than Simon prefers to appear. His home has two stories above ground and two below. The lowest level holds Simon’s suite, including his coffin room. The only furnished guest rooms are on the first floor below ground.

He doesn’t like the idea of Cody poking around on his own, but he doesn’t truly have much to hide. Having a stranger in his home will be just as irritating if Cody wanders around as if he stays put in one room.

Simon stops at the first door after the stairs. “Does this work?”

It’s a simple room. Off-white walls, dark blue bedding. The nightstand looks dusty. A monthly housekeeping service tends the top three floors while Simon sleeps, but he canceled it for the foreseeable future. Too difficult to keep out disguised assassins.

“It works,” Cody says, setting his bags down. Then he shrugs off

his jacket. Even under the loose t-shirt, his balance and strength are clear. He seems even larger without the jacket, like his skin can barely contain his sheer animal presence. It's…

Unsettling, Simon decides. Entirely unsettling.

"I'll be downstairs," Simon says. "There aren't any windows, so no stalking necessary."

"If you say so." Cody drops the jacket on the bed, already leaving traces of himself everywhere. "I'll have more questions after I look this place over. Do you want to meet tonight, or tomorrow night?"

Never would be nice. Maybe Simon can just sleep for a month, until his unwanted werewolf babysitter is gone.

"Tomorrow," Simon says instead, and leaves.

He's been up since before sunset. He's too tired for this.

Once he's on the staircase, out of the werewolf's sight, Simon allows himself to lean on the railing. Ridiculous. He's a vampire. Four hundred and fifty years old. An immortal creature of the night. And walking downstairs is nearly too much for him.

Maybe Dima's right about Simon needing a bodyguard. Dima's usually right, and when he's wrong, it's easier not to point it out.

Simon locks the door to his downstairs suite behind him, then heads to the small kitchenette. A counter, a sink, and a mini fridge of bottled blood. Simon grabs a half-finished bottle and forces down a sip.

After a hundred years of experimenting, they still can't fix the stale taste of the preservative compound. But bottled blood does its job. Simon can go months, maybe years, without live feeding if he has to.

But not forever. If Simon wants to feel safe drinking from a vein again, he has to solve the mystery of Lawrence Baird.

Sure, Dima is working on it. But Dima operates on a decidedly vampiric timescale. Urgency is a foreign concept, except when fascination strikes him. One hint of a mysterious relic or power can distract Dima onto a decade-long tangent.

As for Cody—the man said it himself. He's a bodyguard, not an investigator. No matter how concerned and professional Cody acts, Simon can't trust a werewolf.

He lied to Cody, of course. The premeditated attack was personal. Lawrence used Simon's name. What Simon doesn't know is whether Lawrence was a lone vigilante or part of a larger group.

Simon forces down the last sip of stale blood. He feels steadier now, at least. Leaving the empty bottle on the counter, he stares at the half-burned candle next to it. He snaps his fingers.

A hint of warmth kisses his fingertips. Not enough. The candle's

wick remains cold.

Truly pathetic.

Simon regrets killing Lawrence. He should have shot him in the knees instead of the head. Had Lawrence lived, the treaty council could have interrogated him. That interrogation would have neatly solved the mystery. No need to cower behind his werewolf bodyguard. But without Lawrence's enthralled testimony, Dima's right. Calling in the council is risky.

After the treaty, most hunters' guilds transitioned into liaison and enforcement. The fanatical splinter groups are the ones that went underground. They had hunted vampires and werewolves for centuries. Putting down their blades wasn't an option.

The treaty can't prevent rogue vampires or werewolves either. Pushing a werewolf over the edge is easy, their brute nature just under the surface. Vampire fledglings struggle to control the bloodlust, too. More vampires die within their first year than any other point in their undead lives. They take risks and get themselves fried by sunlight, or they go mad with thirst and break the treaty. The treaty breakers are put down by the nearest qualified enforcer.

Rogue hunters are harder to find than vampires or werewolves. They blend in with the wider population, and Simon doesn't have many contacts with the current generation of humans.

Hiding his search from Cody is an added complication.

But at least Simon has a name to follow, plus one of the greatest modern inventions. Who needs human contact when he has the internet?

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Chapter 6

Cody

Cody stares at his own hands like they're a threat. He could snap at any moment, nails sharpening into claws, reason crumbling into feral instinct. Less than an hour on the job, and he's already lost control with his hands around his principal's wrists.

Stopping a vampire from tearing out his throat? Fine. Involuntary shifting? Not fine. Especially because Simon hadn't been a threat at all. He'd been weak as a human in Cody's grasp.

The guest room smells of faded gardenia detergent. Dust. The scent of death dissipates quickly; Simon doesn't spend time in this room.

Cody should call Tobias and quit. Assignment, career, everything. Vampires have slaughtered werewolves for thousands of years. Werewolves have returned the violent favor. How the fuck is Cody supposed to protect Simon with his wolf constantly snarling under the surface?

Except it wasn't anger that drove Cody's partial shift tonight. It was concern.

Cody jolts himself out of depressing hand contemplation. Time to familiarize himself with his temporary territory. Movement helps control his wolf, enough for Cody to think.

He's never seen a vampire faint before.

Not that Cody's spent much time with vampires. But they definitely don't faint, and Simon's reaction was telling. Alarmed, defensive. Like he was scared of Cody. Trying to hide his weaknesses. Cody understands that. He doesn't like it, because a secretive charge will make this job even harder. But he understands it.

In the dusty, ordinary bathroom, Cody catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Bloodshot eyes, wrinkled shirt, bad decisions. That's the face of a fucking idiot—because Simon's defensive secrecy makes Cody want to stay.

That poison fucked Simon up bad. Maybe it'll wear off in a few days. Maybe it won't. Until then, Simon needs protection, and there's nobody else to take that job. If Simon knew another vampire who could do it, they would be here instead. Hunters and witches are out

of the question when the assailant was human.

Cody might be a loner, but his pack instinct is still too strong to abandon someone in need.

So instead of calling to quit, Cody texts Tobias: *About to inspect the system, will report any issues. Heads up, Simon hated me on sight. This is going to be a hell of a job.*

Tobias replies almost immediately: *Understood, I've got your back. Luckily, he's not the client.*

Warning his boss about a difficult principal is normal. Tobias's reassurance is normal too. Cody's thumb hovers over the screen. Then he shoves his phone in his pocket without sending anything else. Too fucking cowardly to ask how his own cover-up is going.

Tobias is handling that. Cody has to focus on his own job, even if he'd rather throw himself on the dusty bed and sleep for a week.

His tour of the downstairs is quick. No surprises.

Well, the bottles of blood in the fridge are a surprise, but they shouldn't have been. This is a vampire's lair, after all. Standing in the cold white light, Cody smells the faintest trace of blood. A subtly strange element softens the scent. Must be the weird herbs the bottlers use to preserve the blood while keeping it palatable.

Fuck. What would his old pack think of him working for a vampire? Working for a human company is already bad enough.

Cody closes the fridge. He'll need to arrange a grocery delivery for tomorrow, unless he wants to hunt rabbits in the woods.

***

Seven p.m.

Cody is on his second mug of coffee when a door closes downstairs. Which means the opening wasn't loud enough for Cody's werewolf senses to catch from the kitchen—good to know.

Sipping his coffee, Cody leans against the counter. His view of the main hallway is clear, but Simon could still avoid him by staying below ground.

Surprisingly, Simon pauses in the kitchen doorway a few minutes later. "Where did you get that?"

"The coffee?" Cody asks. He'd found the mug in the cupboards, along with a twenty-year-old coffee maker still in its box. Lots of mugs and glasses, very few plates. Simon clearly drinks his meals.

Simon points at the sink, where a pan is soaking. "I smell eggs, too."

"I had groceries delivered," Cody says. "I brought the perishables and coffee in this morning, but there's another batch I'll need to bring

in tonight."

Waking up to meet the first delivery hadn't exactly helped Cody's exhaustion. Adjusting to nocturnal hours is rough. But he wanted to get a few weeks' worth of groceries in at once. The fewer deliveries, the fewer strangers on the property. And he doesn't intend to start a predictable schedule.

He made a point to avoid any food with garlic.

"I suppose you need to eat," Simon remarks, neutral. "Did they come in?"

Oh. That concern makes more sense than any interest in Cody's breakfast. "The drivers dropped everything off at the gate. I can show you the camera footage later, if you like."

"No need," Simon says, and maybe Cody is imagining the air of relief. The vampire clearly doesn't want strangers in his lair.

Which is smart but unfortunately includes Cody. He needs to work a little extra to get on Simon's good side, to make this job go more smoothly.

Simon doesn't look like a vampire tonight. The soft blue sweater brings out his eyes in a disconcertingly pretty way. He could be any wealthy young man in need of hired protection. No sign of his true age, whatever that is.

At least the subtle bump of a hip holster is a reminder that he's dangerous.

Cody, meanwhile, is in a simple t-shirt and jeans. He tends to run hot, and the house is comfortable. He would boil alive in a sweater right now.

"Do you need to… drink breakfast?" Cody asks. All his scripts for 'reassuring small talk with principals' are useless here. "I want to install the alarm on your phone, but it can wait if you're hungry. I mean, thirsty."

Apparently, his small talk game is good enough—a faint smile curves Simon's lips. "We don't drink every day. You can install your little alarm now."

He sets his phone down on the table, taps until the screen brightens, then steps back. Cody has plenty of space to take it, no touching involved. Simon remains nearby, though, motionless and watchful.

Cody swipes through, trying not to be too curious about everything else on Simon's phone. Everything looks weirdly normal—music, social media, puzzle games. Having a specific Vampire Social App in the app store would violate secrecy laws.

"I apologize for my temper last night," Simon says, sudden and

quiet.

Cody freezes briefly. “No need.”

Simon leans against the back of a chair, seeming to relax. “I was rude on purpose several times. Trust me, I’m old enough to know better.”

“How old are you?” Cody asks, then grins. “Or is that rude to ask?”

“Four hundred fifty, give or take.” Simon points at the phone. “I need all those little apps to keep up with the culture. And to make Kimiko cringe when I say she ‘ate that.’”

Horror shivers down Cody’s spine. “I don’t know Kimiko, but she’s right. Please don’t.”

“How old are you?” Simon asks.

Cody’s already getting to the point where he has to think about his exact age. How much harder is it to remember after the first couple hundred years? “Twenty-eight.”

“An infant,” Simon remarks, and damn. He looks cute with a smile.

Vampire, Cody reminds himself. Ruthless bloodsucking monster.

Plus, Cody’s here on a job. Watching for threats, not cute vampire smiles. He puts the phone on the table. No touching. “Press this button once to alert me for anything non-urgent. Press it twice for anything urgent—that will alert both me and Atwood. When in doubt, press twice. We’d rather overreact than under-react.”

Simon retrieves the phone. “What would be non-urgent?”

“You can’t remember the security password, you’re mad I left dishes in the sink, you spilled milk—uh, blood on the floor, whatever.” Cody gestures to the fridge. “I won’t mop it up for you, but you can still call. I’ll do my best not to bother you, and you get to bother me whenever. That’s how the job works.”

Simon is quiet. That cold vampire stillness again, when he looks all of four hundred fifty years old. Give or take. Then he comes alive with small movements. “You should bring your groceries in before the raccoons find them. I can get the garage door—it’s a more direct route to the kitchen.” Simon taps his phone, and rumbling starts from the ground floor. “Isn’t technology magical?”

“Appreciate it,” Cody says. “Stay downstairs, away from windows, while I’m out. Okay?”

“Understood,” Simon says cooperatively.

Cody flips through the camera feeds on his work phone. Nothing is amiss, so he takes off via the garage. Clearly a sign of a paranormal monster: Simon’s two-car garage holds two cars. No piles of boxes and junk.

This time of year, full dark fell hours ago. Small lights outline the driveway and front gate, helping Cody's keen eyes. He scents for any intruders as he jogs towards the gate. No humans, no raccoons. Everything looked fine on the camera feeds, but being alert is part of the job.

Tonight is going better than expected. Simon is easier to deal with compared to the night before, and Cody has to sympathize with his previous prickliness. Cody hadn't exactly reacted well to this assignment, but he'd had a couple days to get over his initial refusal. Losing control on the full moon is a great distraction.

Simon only learned about the werewolf moving into his house when said werewolf was already on his doorstep. Because vampires are assholes to each other too, apparently, and his shitty sire didn't warn him.

When Cody returns with groceries in tow, Simon is still in the kitchen. He holds a bag of coffee, peering at the label.

"Can you still eat things recreationally?" Cody asks, because Simon seems not to mind questions.

Simon sets the coffee down. "Some do, but I find it unpleasant. I like smelling food, though."

Cody starts transferring groceries into the empty pantry. Turning his back on a vampire feels wrong, and he shoves down his bristling instincts. "Any favorites?"

"Fresh fruit," Simon answers, his voice still safely across the room. "Fresh bread. Coffee."

"I'll add more fruit to the next delivery," Cody says, though hopefully this job will end before the first batch runs out. "Did you have any plans for today? I mean, tonight?"

He turns around to find the kitchen empty. Cody's principal is missing, and alarm jolts him more awake than the coffee.

Seconds later, a mechanical growl clarifies everything—the unmistakable sound of a car starting in the garage.

Simon is sneaking out.

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Chapter 7

Simon

The automobile's purr sounds as smug as Simon feels. First concrete, then the long gravel driveway crunches beneath his tires. He has his destination entered in the navigation system but won't press start until he's on the highway. No need for directions yet—Simon knows how to escape his own estate.

His werewolf babysitter will probably be angry about this. But that's a problem for future Simon. Eight hours from now Simon. Present Simon has an address to investigate.

Small lights outline the property gate. Simon presses the remote, slowing slightly to account for the time the gate takes to—

The gate isn't opening.

Dread building between the seconds, Simon presses the remote again. Nothing. Fuck.

Gravel sprays as Simon brings the car to a skidding halt. One hand clenched on the steering wheel, Simon can't decide whether to park, reverse, or what. He stares blankly at the motionless iron gate. Then up at the rearview mirror, where a figure in a stupidly tight white t-shirt walks up the drive.

Cody isn't even jogging, the fucking asshole. Just a leisurely nighttime stroll to Simon's failure. Future Simon's problem has unexpectedly become present Simon's problem.

The temptation to run Cody over is very strong. But that wouldn't even kill a werewolf, because Simon wasn't prescient enough to install silver hubcaps. So instead, Simon throws the car into park, yanks out the keys, and gets out. Leaning on the door, he wishes again that he could turn into a swarm of bats.

"You opened the garage so you could get a head start," Cody says when he's close enough. "Not to help me with the groceries."

"What did you do to my gate?" Simon asks, his voice cold and clipped.

Cody looks about as pissed off as Simon, his expression clear in the silvery moonlight. That heavy jaw tenses into an admirable scowl. "I didn't do anything," Cody says, with hyper-controlled politeness. "The

Atwood team reset your system, in case someone else had a remote or code."

"With the convenient side effect of trapping me here." Simon despises his poisoned weakness. At full strength, he could scale the fence like a lizard. In his current condition, he would be humiliated by trying.

Cody takes a deep breath, like he's counting to ten. "We need to talk about expectations."

"I expect to freely exit and enter my own home," Simon snaps.

"Did I say you couldn't?" Cody gestures at the gate. "I said I would accompany you if you left the house. In case that was unclear, that means you can leave the house. If you'd told me you wanted to leave, I could have grabbed the new remote."

Simon's anger burns hot as the fresh taste of blood. How dare Cody point out… something entirely reasonable that Simon had forgotten.

Because Cody isn't the one keeping him here. Another set of expectations pins Simon down with centuries of obedience.

"Dima wants me to stay here," Simon says. "He hired you."

Cody's scowl lifts in surprise, then deepens. "He's paying me, but I work for you. I'm a bodyguard, not a jailer. Not even a babysitter. You can go anywhere you like, as long as I have advance notice to get you there safely."

Extremely reasonable. Simon hates him for it.

"I don't know what issues you have with him," Cody continues, hesitant. "But taking it out on me won't help."

The words hit like a stake through the chest. Because Cody's right, damn him. Simon's been treating Cody like an extension of Dima's will —except unlike Dima, Cody is safe to lash out at.

Simon needs to straighten out his thoughts. Werewolves are *not* safe to lash out at. Francisco's memory is proof enough of that. But Cody seems to want to play nice. Professional. He's a mere twenty-eight years old—Simon can handle him.

"Trust me, I have plenty of issues with you," Simon says. But he smiles along with it.

Sure enough, Cody relaxes. Just slightly. "You aren't the first, and you won't be the last. Where were you going?"

Simon's first instinct is to lie. He presses it down in favor of partial truth. The odds of escaping without Cody are slim, now that Cody knows it's an option. "I found Lawrence's address. I want to search his home."

"The guy who attacked you?" Cody glances around, as if the mere mention might summon assassins from the dark forest. "I thought

Dima was handling the investigation."

Simon isn't used to explaining himself. He doesn't like it, so he chooses not to. "So?"

"How far away is it?" Cody asks. "Did he live alone?"

"Forty minutes without traffic, and there's never any traffic when I'm driving. Nocturnal perks." Simon grins, showing off pointed teeth. "Per Lawrence's socials, he had a roommate."

Cody's gaze lingers on Simon's fangs. "Were you going to knock on the door, or creep in through the window?"

Idiot. "I have to be invited in."

"Right, vampire." Cody sighs. "Give me the address, and we can go tomorrow."

Simon's grin closes off. "Tonight."

Cody does that patient counting-to-ten thing again. "I need a few hours to research the area, the building, and the roommate. Assuming Lawrence's roommate is human, we can't knock on the door at midnight. That's fucking weird."

Acquiescing to a werewolf feels wrong. Worse still is the fact that Cody is right.

"Tomorrow is acceptable." Simon dangles the keys. "See you at the house."

Cody moves to the edge of the driveway as Simon gets back in the car. The temptation to run him over flits past once again. Simon resists it and drives slowly back to the garage.

The brief journey proves one unfortunate fact. By the time Simon pulls the key from the ignition, he's tired. Nights of rest and bottled blood haven't fixed the poison yet. His body is still sluggish, even as his mind rails against every restriction.

He needs fresh blood to restore his strength and magic.

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Chapter 8

Cody

Cody is relieved to see Simon bright and early—sorry, dark and early?—the next night. He'd half expected another escape attempt. A failure Cody would have to report to Tobias. But Simon emerges from his underground lair as Cody is eating breakfast. Cody tenses, fighting back an instinctive growl, as Simon sits across the table.

Then silence. No disarming banter this time. Simon just stares creepily at the wall as Cody finishes his omelet. Utterly still, and if he's lost in thought, those thoughts don't show on his porcelain face.

Staring at the wall might be the best available option. Simon could be watching Cody eat instead. Or sipping a bottle of blood for his own breakfast, the thought of which turns Cody's stomach. Call him a prude, but werewolves only feed on humans when something has gone very wrong. Vampires do it as a matter of course.

"Ready to go?" Cody asks, putting the dishes in the sink.

Simon rises, dangling keys from his finger. "What's the approved bodyguard protocol—me driving or you driving?"

"I'll drive," Cody answers, and easily catches the keys when Simon flings them.

"Just as well." Simon heads towards the garage. "My license is a little out of date."

Cody snorts. "Did they make drivers licenses in the sixteenth century? Wait, or was it the fifteenth?" It always takes him a minute to remember how that goes.

"Sixteenth." Simon pauses to enter the security code at the garage door. "The treaty council provides sufficient identification. I've just neglected to request a new license this decade."

Reflexively, Cody holds the door closed before Simon can open it. "Sorry," he says when Simon jerks back. "Let me enter rooms first when we're outside the house, okay?"

"If it makes you feel useful," Simon says drily.

Simon's brief nervousness is only visible because Cody is watching him so closely. "How old are you in your current license?" Cody asks

as a distraction, while he scans the freakishly clean garage. “All clear.”

“Forty-five,” Simon answers, following him towards the car. “It’s awkward when I get pulled over.”

Cody pauses at the driver’s door. “Does that happen often?”

Giving one of those little smiles that makes him look alive, Simon pets the sleek black hood. “It’s not my fault these newfangled automobiles go so fast.”

Cody is extremely grateful to be the driver as he settles behind the wheel.

He’s also grateful he insisted on the extra night to research their destination. Lawrence’s apartment and roommate seem innocuous enough from what he and Atwood’s background specialist dug up. Cody and Simon shouldn’t be driving into a waiting ambush. But traveling with a vampire is new to Cody. He might not like vampires in general, or Simon in specific, but the ancient brat won’t burn to a crisp on his watch.

Simon used the intervening time to contact Lawrence’s roommate Erica, posing as Lawrence’s cousin. The story is that Lawrence is staying with family during a mental health episode, and Simon is picking up some things. Which sounds implausible as fuck, but Cody’s just here for security. Alibi critique isn’t in his job description.

At the gate, Cody presses the new remote. “I identified three motels with vacancies along our route,” he says as he exits onto the road. “If we get delayed, we can hole up in the nearest one until sunset tomorrow.”

“This won’t take that long,” Simon says, sounding amused.

Maybe Simon can be blasé about the danger, after surviving so many centuries. But Cody’s never had a principal vulnerable to sunlight before. “Can’t be too careful.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Simon reclines his seat, putting his feet up on the dash. “Worst-case scenario, I’ll just sleep in the trunk.”

Another minute down the darkened road, Cody says, “What.”

“I modify all my car trunks,” Simon explains. “It’s fully sun-proofed, plus I can lock it from the inside.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Cody says out loud, while making a silent vow to himself. He cannot let a principal sleep in a fucking car trunk.

They fall quiet for the next twenty minutes. Lights and traffic pick up as they approach the city. Not enough to slow them down, just enough to remind Cody that other people exist outside his own present circumstances. The whole mass of humanity and the fractional percentages of werewolves and vampires are going about their normal lives. Nobody knows that Cody’s currently strapped into a car with his

hereditary enemy.

He'd like to think nobody would care, but he knows better than that.

This is the closest Cody has been to Simon for any length of time. It's strangely comfortable when Simon isn't being a brat. So far, except for the time Simon fainted, they've avoided physical contact. Cody's more than happy to keep that streak going—no matter how touchably soft Simon looks with his sweaters and tousled hair. No touching means the job is boring. Cody really wants this job to be boring.

Minus the whole vampire thing.

"Tell me about yourself," Simon says out of nowhere. At a glance, he's still looking out the window.

"Really?" Cody returns his own eyes to the road. "I like barbeque and long walks in the park, and I haven't chewed on the furniture in years."

"Any furniture you chew at my house is coming out of your paycheck," Simon says. "And yes, really, fair is fair. I assume you got an entire dossier about me."

Cody hadn't, actually. Atwood usually provides a basic profile, with more detail as necessary. Simon's profile was the shortest Cody had ever received—it didn't even include Simon's date of birth. Tobias is the only other person at the company who knows Simon is a vampire.

"I know where you live, and I know your sire. That's about it," Cody says. "I wouldn't have time to read an entire history book."

"That's more than I know about you." Simon pulls his feet down from the dashboard. Probably staring creepily at Cody now. "Why don't you have a pack?"

Cody's hands tighten on the steering wheel. He focuses hard on keeping his claws from sharpening.

He isn't used to answering that question. His entire social circle is human these days, and most of them don't know he's a werewolf. Of those few, Tobias is the only one who knows how dangerous being a lone wolf is. It's not a life anyone would choose.

"I got kicked out." Cody concentrates on the road, his wolf bristling with old defensiveness. "The alpha didn't like me dating a human."

Simon pauses before answering. "I'm sorry. That pack sounds very… traditional."

Cody appreciates the phrasing. 'That pack' instead of 'your pack.' "I didn't realize how traditional until I left, yeah. Maybe if I hadn't met Patrick, or if I'd met him a few years later, I would have stayed.

But I met him when I was twenty and stubborn as fuck."

Simon shifts in his seat. The weight of his gaze doesn't feel creepy anymore, but the thoughtful assessment might be weirder. "Was this Patrick worth it?"

"We only dated for a month," Cody admits. "I never even told him I was a wolf. But yeah. Anyone would have been worth it. That wasn't a pack I could live with forever."

Not without becoming someone he would hate to be. Except being on his own isn't working either. Every year without a pack bond, Cody becomes more of a monster.

"Leaving must have been hard," Simon says, still weirdly sympathetic. "Even if it was the right choice, they were still family."

"Not in the moment, but after, yeah." Cody adjusts his grip on the steering wheel. No risk of his claws coming out, now. He doesn't feel like a wolf—more like an awkward, vulnerable human. This isn't the attitude he needs on a job. Better change the subject. "What about you? Any vampire siblings?"

The question seems neutral enough. Asking about Simon's original human family could be sad, since they've been dead for centuries. Vampires tend to form small social units with the people they turn, and fledglings of the same sire call each other siblings.

The temperature drops. "Not anymore," Simon says sharply. "Eyes on the road, wolf. We're almost there."

Finding parking in the city forces Cody's focus away from the chill in Simon's voice. Four hundred and fifty years is a long time to lose people. But that's none of Cody's business. He carefully angles the car into a free bit of curb.

"Remember to let me enter rooms first," Cody says, killing the engine. "There are two elevators and two staircases. If there's a problem, we head for the nearest staircase. I'll signal Atwood, but you should plan to press your panic button too just in case I can't."

"Do I still let you enter the staircase first if I'm running for my undead life?" Simon asks. The return to his unhelpful attitude is unexpectedly reassuring.

"I'll be between you and any known danger," Cody answers, because one of them has to take this seriously. "Let's do this quickly."

Lawrence Baird's neighborhood is still busy this early in the evening. Apartment buildings stack around little local retailers. Twenty-somethings new to the area mingle with old folks who've been there for decades.

Cody and Simon's destination is an aged five-story building, and their first obstacle is the call box in the lobby. Cody stands back,

eyeing the exits, as Simon presses the room number. A tinny voice replies a moment later.

"Hey, who's there?"

"Hi, Erica? This is Simon, Lawrence's cousin," Simon replies, his voice shockingly cheerful and sweet. "Um, I brought a friend with me, is that all right?"

"It works." The second lobby door clicks unlocked. "Come on up."

As he leads the way to the elevator, Cody asks, "Does that count as an invitation?"

"Yes, it does," Simon says. "It's about the intention, not the words. I can enter the building and her apartment, but not anybody else's dwelling."

The elevator is grubby and smells like weed. There's something off, and Cody takes a moment to figure it out. The metallic walls only show one blurred reflection.

Normally, Cody wouldn't let a principal investigate their own attempted assassination. Nobody else has been reckless enough to try. But Cody needs to pick his battles with Simon. He's lucky nobody had warned Simon about the gate system change—last night could have gone very differently.

At least Simon is armed tonight, and Cody knows he can aim.

Lawrence and Erica's apartment is on the third floor. A woman opens at Simon's knock, then frowns. "Who is this?"

Erica is a tall woman, with short red hair and blinding floral overalls. Her suspicion cuts towards Cody, understandably. Cody does his best to seem unassuming, but he can't change his height and build. Next to him, Simon looks like an adorable kitten.

"Um, this is Cody," Simon says. That 'um' is a nice touch.

Erica's glare turns thoughtful. "Your boyfriend?"

"No," Cody says immediately—just as Simon answers, "Yes."

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Chapter 9

Simon

For fuck's sake, doesn't Cody know how to lie properly?

Simon is forced to pivot, smiling awkwardly instead of glaring. "Don't tell Lawrence, please?" Steeling his nerves, he reaches for Cody's hand. "I'm not out to my family."

Cody tenses but doesn't flinch away. His grasp settles huge and warm around Simon's hand, and Simon's skin crawls. Like the threat of dawn at the end of the night.

Erica's confusion melts into compassion. What a nice young woman. "My lips are sealed. Make it quick—*my* boyfriend is coming over in an hour." She steps back from the doorway, clearly hesitating before adding, "I'm glad Lawrence is getting help. He's been weird for the past few months."

Help. Yes, a bullet in the head, very helpful.

"What do you mean, weird?" Simon asks.

"Just quiet." Erica shrugs, her blue and orange overalls jumping with the movement. "And… I don't know. You'll see in his room."

Erica lets them into the small, clean apartment. The furniture is secondhand. Judging by the vivid landscapes and animal portraits, Erica is responsible for the wall decorations. She shouldn't have much trouble finding a new roommate once she and the landlord realize Lawrence isn't catching up on rent.

"That one, the closed door," Erica says, then heads to the open kitchen.

Simon yanks his hand away, wishing he could scour it clean. Rubbing the werewolf's touch off on his sweater would look strange. Erica is puttering around, moving random items to seemingly random places, keeping a wary eye on her guests.

Mustn't outstay their welcome.

Simon gestures at Lawrence's bedroom. "After you?"

"Thanks for remembering." Cody leans close. Not touching, just looming into Simon's personal space. His murmur is hot in Simon's ear: "Boyfriend."

“Shut up,” Simon hisses, and jerks out of the way. Then he glances at Erica to make sure she hasn’t seen. Luckily, she’s currently busy moving a bowl from one spot on the counter to another.

Simon is hardly a monk, but he hasn’t had a lasting relationship in the past half century. Loneliness is more comfortable than trusting a man not to leave.

Cody opens the door, hand near the firearm at his hip, and enters Lawrence’s room. A moment later, he says, “Holy shit. You can come in, but… holy shit.”

A bad feeling comes over Simon. Specifically, a faint burning in his eyes.

“Wonderful,” Simon mutters, following Cody in. He closes the door and takes in Lawrence’s bedroom.

Messier than the living room, but Simon has seen worse bachelor hovels over the centuries. The laundry pile cascades from its armchair onto the floor. At least the bed has a frame, and actual curtains cover the blinds.

Also strung over the blinds are garlands of garlic bulbs, the pungency overpowering any laundry odor. Simon’s eyes sting worse.

The wall above the bed is covered in crosses. Wood, gold, iron, silver, beautiful carvings and two sticks tied together. The visual impact is bizarre.

The spiritual impact is nothing. Everyone knows the thing about crosses is a myth. Everyone who knows anything real about vampires, at least.

Cody covers his nose. Werewolves aren’t allergic to garlic, but the smell must still be strong for him. “Are you going to be okay with this?”

“Just make it quick.” Simon resists the urge to rub his eyes, which will only make it worse, and heads towards the computer desk. “You start with his dresser.”

“What are we looking for, exactly?” Cody asks.

“Fuck if I know,” Simon snaps, then catches himself. It’s not Cody’s fault that Lawrence knew about the stupid garlic allergy. “Sorry. Anything about hunters or vampires, I suppose. Ideally there will be a notebook with an unhinged manifesto.”

“Got it. Looking for the book titled *My Exact Motive and Plan to Kill a Vampire*.” Cody is annoyingly funny sometimes. He opens two drawers at once. “You know, you should warn a man before calling him your boyfriend out of nowhere.”

Eyes still burning, Simon opens a junk-filled desk drawer. “I didn’t call you anything,” he says, grabbing a pen to poke the other objects

around with. “I just agreed with Erica. First rule of deception—if your mark helps you out with an explanation, you let them.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Cody says drily. “Nothing of interest here, except this guy owned the most boring sock collection I’ve ever seen. I’ll check the closet.”

Simon finds a case to pack up Lawrence’s laptops and hard drives. Convenient of modern creatures to centralize their secrets, though Simon may have to ask a tech savvy youngster to break in. Hopefully Cody knows how to hack. They have to teach hacking in bodyguard school, right? If only Simon had Lawrence’s phone, too, but either Kimiko or Dima has that.

Then Simon peers under the bed, where he finds a case of water bottles labeled *Holy Water*.

Probably not the real stuff, judging by the crosses on the wall. Simon can’t sense any magic in it either. But he won’t take chances. It’s good that Cody is here—a thought that annoys Simon greatly. “Can you check if this water is blessed by witches, or the fake religious stuff?”

Cody opens one bottle and sniffs. “Fake religious stuff.”

The rest of the search goes just like that. There’s a collection of stakes in the nightstand, which would be effective in killing vampires if aimed correctly. As well as most other creatures. But the stakes are on top of a dozen novels and pseudo-histories, none of them truthful at first glance.

All Lawrence’s wards and weapons are based on superstition. Some of which is accurate, like the garlic allergy. Some of which is misunderstood, like the holy water. Simon has been an atheist for centuries. If any gods exist, their priests hold no particular sway over vampires. Witches are the ones who can bless water and oil against vampires, using magic, not prayer.

Lawrence was obsessed with vampires. No—Simon looks at the window. The man was terrified of them. But he can’t be affiliated with a true hunters’ guild. A real hunter would have real holy water under his bed.

“This is weird,” Cody says, frowning up at the crosses. Smarter than he looks. He might say he isn’t an investigator, but he seems very interested in investigating.

“We’ll figure out what it means later.” Simon winces internally at the slip. He doesn’t mean to include Cody in any ‘we.’ “Pack up the stakes, the books, and I suppose some clothes, so this looks like a care package. Then take the garlic down—don’t bring it, just throw it out so poor Erica doesn’t have to deal with the smell. Then wash your hands three times. Then we leave.”

Fuck, this garlic is horrible. Simon pulls out a handkerchief to dab his watering eyes.

Cody looks up from dumping out a random briefcase. “You carry a handkerchief?”

“And you don’t?” Simon scoffs. “Kids these days.”

Cody’s entire face twitches, like he’s trying not to smile.

***

Simon wakes as the engine stills. Tense, disoriented, he doesn’t remember falling asleep—just leaving Erica’s apartment, getting in the car, and then a long steady drive. Now he’s back in his own garage.

The night is dark and sheltering. Simon’s body is heavy with fatigue. That’s no excuse for falling peacefully asleep with a werewolf at the wheel.

“You awake?” Cody asks.

Simon yanks off his seatbelt. “Don’t speak to me.”

The vehicle rocks as Cody follows Simon out. “Let me in first.”

Simon allows that, because he agreed, and he’s too tense and petty for a civilized argument tonight. Dima’s right. Simon is still so childish and irrational. He restrains himself as Cody clears the first floor of the house.

But when Simon tries to head downstairs to his coffin room, Cody blocks his path again. “I have a question,” Cody says, taking up the whole doorway with his broad shoulders and feral eyes.

Simon’s anger twists outward, too. “Good for you.”

Feral eyes. Feral and greedy and cruel—not cautious, not curious in the darkness. Definitely not kind. That’s an illusion.

“Why do you hate werewolves so much?” Cody asks.

Simon’s cold bones feel even colder, pinning his soul to the past. Which will hurt more—silence or answer? Who will it hurt?

“A werewolf killed my fledge-brother,” Simon says, and Cody’s flinch isn’t as satisfying as he hoped. “I’m going downstairs.”

Silent, shocked, Cody lets him pass.

Simon’s descent is lonely, his only company his own hollow heart. No candles ignite to light his way. Memory hurts, but his eyes are dry now.

He lied to Cody. About the specifics, at least. A werewolf attacked Francisco, but that’s not what killed him.

Francisco walked into daylight and burned.

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Chapter 10

Cody

Sunlight feels like a rare luxury after a week on this job. Cody savors the warmth from his seat on the back porch steps. He's up early to check in with Tobias, who's on a regular human schedule.

"How's it going?" Tobias asks.

Cradling his phone to his ear, Cody lets his eyes rest on the evergreen forest. "Everything's fine. Stable. How's Princess?"

There's a muffled television sound. Tobias must be working from home or cheating on a day off. "Don't distract me with my precious angel. That's not your 'everything's fine, stable' voice."

Cody winces. Tobias's insight is great as a friend, sometimes inconvenient as a boss. "The job is fine. No incidents, and Simon is cooperating better than expected. He just seems… troubled."

Tobias closes a door, and the television sound cuts off. "That's none of our business."

"I know, I'm a bodyguard, not a therapist." Even though Cody can't stop thinking about how haunted Simon looked in that dimly lit garage.

A werewolf killed his brother. That shouldn't be a surprise—Cody knows their kinds' history. He just isn't used to meeting people who experienced that history directly. Simon's brittle words cut deeper than the old pack legends.

In those legends, vampires are cold all the way through. Cold flesh, cold blood, cold hearts. Death smothers their last spark of morality. They trade favors and grudges because friendship is foreign to them. Certainly they have no respect for their prey—the living.

Real life is more complicated than legends. Cody knows this, in theory. His old pack's lore doesn't regard humans much better than vampires, but Cody didn't let that stop him from befriending them. He left his backwards-thinking pack for one. It makes sense that vampires might be more complicated, too.

Cody isn't concerned with vampires in general, though. Just Simon.

“Not a therapist, not a friend,” Tobias emphasizes, then laughs. “Speaking of work friendships—how are you holding up? Any… furry problems?”

Cody groans. “I hate you so much. I’ve been fine.” The truth surprises Cody as he answers. He’s spent so much time thinking about Simon, he hasn’t been worried about his own problems. “I’ve been good, actually. The full moon’s still three weeks away, and I haven’t had any early issues.”

“Glad to hear it,” Tobias says. “Your last job is all covered up now. If this vampire thing goes well, we can talk about rotating you back onto short jobs. Unless you want a break. Aditi is always talking about this work-life balance nonsense.”

“I’ll tell her you called it nonsense,” Cody warns.

Tobias laughs. “If you don’t hear from me in three days, she has me chained in the basement.”

“Good for her,” Cody says, and Tobias laughs again.

“Fuck you.” From Tobias, that’s high praise. “Keep up the good work.”

After they hang up, Cody lingers in the sunlight. The wooden boards are warm under his palms, a grounding contrast to the worry in Cody’s heart. Tobias never quite understands the constant, cyclical threat of Cody’s wolf. He seems to think Cody just has to power through and control it, once and for all.

But the moon waxes every month, and Cody will always be a werewolf.

***

Cody is constructing a multi-tier sandwich when Simon joins him in the kitchen. The vampire’s arrival is silent, his scent the only sign. Pressing the sandwich down so it adheres properly, Cody asks, “Need something?”

Simon leans in the doorway, a dented toolbox in hand. He’s in another of those soft sweaters, green this time, looking like he just rolled out of his coffin. “I’m going upstairs to stare at a wall.” Simon glances at the sandwich. “You can bring that behemoth with you.”

“Thanks,” Cody says, bemused, and grabs a paper towel before following.

He’s barely seen Simon over the past few nights. If Simon’s learned anything from their visit to Lawrence’s apartment, he hasn’t shared it.

When new acquaintances ask about Cody’s job, they want exciting stories. Cody has a few of those—even a few he’s legally permitted to tell—but usually, guarding is boring. If everything goes well, there’s

nothing to do but watch and wait. Some people find the constant alertness exhausting, but Cody finds it natural. Werewolf thing.

With Simon mostly staying below ground, this job is even slower than usual. All Cody has to do is watch the cameras and inspect the perimeter a couple of times a day. The most excitement was yesterday's grocery delivery. Eggs and orange juice: officially cleared, not a threat.

Now, Cody follows Simon to the second floor above ground. Their destination is a small, dusty room set up as a reading parlor. There are books on glass-door shelves, comfortable chairs, a towering brick fireplace, and boarded-up windows.

Simon flicks the light switch, revealing the mural covering the walls.

Cody had seen it, along with similar murals in other rooms, when he first toured the house. This mural has a rough style that might be painterly or impressionistic—art styles aren't Cody's area of expertise. Definitely not cubist, at least. An evening-blue cityscape surrounds the room with a strange mix of buildings. A neon night club sits between a chapel and a smithy. A horse-drawn carriage parks on one wall. An early twenties car parks on another. The city is inhabited with shadowy sketches of people. Blurred by movement or distance.

Most striking are the large patches of blank white wall.

Simon crouches in the center of the room and opens his toolbox. The scent of paint is clear even before he starts setting out tubes and a palette.

"You paint?" Cody asks, which sounds stupid and obvious as soon as he says it.

"Sometimes." Simon sits cross-legged and leans back on his hands. "Sometimes I just stare at the wall. That's the important part."

Cody doesn't know what to say to that, so he doesn't say anything. He picks a spot with a good view of Simon, the door, and the boarded-up window. Then he eats his sandwich and stares at Simon, while Simon stares at the wall.

Simon's pale face tips towards one of the blank patches. Cody hasn't considered his profile delicate before. Sometimes Simon looks ancient, sometimes no more than twenty. Tonight, every aspect rests in balance. Deceptive serenity, unmarred by the passage of time.

Cody envies that balance. Better than fighting his own nature for control. Maybe balance is contagious, though. Watching Simon in silence is weirdly soothing.

The undead brat is more complicated than Cody expected. More likable—which Cody will never admit out loud, because the feeling

clearly isn't mutual. But that trip to Lawrence's apartment was… fun. Cody liked glimpsing different facets of Simon. Considerate in his deception, clearly aware that Erica was a solitary woman letting two strange men into her apartment. Quick-thinking and clearly open-minded, running with the boyfriend story.

Weirdly adorable, with his teary red eyes from the garlic allergy.

Admitting a werewolf killed his brother felt like defensiveness, vulnerability, not hatred. Like the moment he claimed they were boyfriends and tucked his icy hand into Cody's.

Time passes. Cody's sandwich disappears, but the paints lie untouched. Simon stares at the wall as promised. With every moment, Cody wants more and more to know what Simon is thinking about.

He wants Simon to stop hiding below ground. Maybe sweeping the problem under the rug is the right answer, but Cody's never been that kind of person. He can't fix something he can't see.

"Can you tell me what happened to your brother?" Cody asks, breaking the silence.

Simon goes rigid. Then he moves only his head to glare. "You're supposed to just let me brood about that."

Cody shouldn't say that Simon is too cute to brood. He shouldn't even think it. "Sorry. We can establish brooding protocols if you like."

Turning to the wall again, Simon falls silent for long enough that Cody thinks the conversation is over. Then he inhales to fuel a dramatic sigh and rises to his feet.

"It's not like it's a secret." Simon picks up a paint brush and points it at Cody. "I'll tell you what happened—if you paint a wall for me."

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Chapter 11

Simon

Simon delights in Cody's consternation. Like he's been ordered to strip naked and run to the road and back. No—that might have been less disconcerting for poor Cody.

"Don't be shy," Simon says. Sweetly, because he enjoys being an asshole.

"I'm not a painter." Cody's brow knits. "I'm just going to ruin your wall."

"Mortals," Simon sighs. "So afraid of illusory permanence. If you paint it badly, I'll simply paint over it."

Someday. Maybe. Simon doesn't like finishing his projects. It's never the right time, and no home lasts forever.

Cody takes the paintbrush warily. His body heat breathes against Simon's fingers. "Don't say I didn't warn you. Which wall do you want me to paint?"

Simon's hand tingles with proximity. "This room is fine. Pick a blank spot."

He retreats to an armchair, where he leans. Casually. Not because he's still so tired. He feels better now than moments ago. The question about Francisco knocked him off balance, so he knocked Cody off balance in turn. A conversational trick Simon learned from Dima, though Dima didn't know he was teaching it. Simon feels more secure as Cody frowns at the murals.

Secure and curious. This isn't a test, exactly. Simon's just interested in what Cody will do.

Appearing to reach a decision, Cody crouches by the paint. Blue flakes onto his fingers as he unscrews the first tube. Next is green, poured into the tray right on top of the blue. Cody mixes them together, and the rich colors disappear into each other like a shadowed pond. The brush bristles are one inch wide. Too large for detail work, too small for covering space.

Cody's hands are rough and oversized. The paintbrush looks like a toothpick.

Simon accepts his own terrible taste—Cody's hands are nice. That assessment doesn't mean anything, as long as Simon remembers those fingernails can sharpen into claws.

"You don't have to tell me anything," Cody says, rising with the tray and brush. He might even think he's sincere, but reluctance thuds clearly in his heartbeat.

Simon lifts his chin in challenge. "Paint the fucking wall, wolf."

"Sure thing, bloodsucker," Cody says with a grin, and sets down the tray at the closest blank patch. Between a broken windmill and a convenience store, each rendered in blurry impressions. Memories.

Simon had imagined a table there, where someone might sit with coffee and paper. He never decided who to draw. A bit hypocritical mocking Cody for hesitation, perhaps.

Ten years of indecision break when Cody touches the brush to the plaster. A firm line down, pause, then across. Up. Across, six inches by six inches. Cody fills in the square without lifting his brush, then dips for more paint and starts a new square.

Another, a foot above. Another, overlapping.

Simon watches, strangely riveted. This isn't a test, exactly, but Cody has passed it. He fills the space with form and control but not order. The overlapping squares are as much about texture as color, which changes slightly from stroke to stroke. The blue and green aren't perfectly blended.

Cody doesn't step outside his ability. No attempt at a figure, nor at matching Simon's style. Just square after square, until Simon isn't off-balance anymore.

"Three hundred years ago," Simon begins quietly. "I was living with my brother, Francisco, and my sister, Tania."

Cody pauses, long enough that paint drips from his frozen brush, then continues without speaking.

Annoying. Simon would have liked to scold him.

"We traveled to Spain, because Francisco wanted to visit his childhood home." Simon doesn't remember the year, exactly, or even the weather. He and Tania disagreed about it later. He remembers the catacombs they slept in when they couldn't find safer lodging. "I told him it was foolish. Two hundred years after he was gifted, everything would be different, and he would be long forgotten. But Francisco was sweet, and we indulged him."

Simon hesitates this time, sorting out his words. The events aren't a secret, but he hasn't told the story in centuries. Not since he told Dima, who comforted him. The first time Simon had seen Dima in years, and he'd been so desperately grateful for the affection.

“His hometown had changed,” Simon continues. “A pack of werewolves had moved in. They caught Francisco alone, and their alpha claimed him by force.”

Cody jerks around. “Claimed? You mean with a mating bite?”

“You’re dripping paint on the floor,” Simon points out, taking comfort in his own pettiness. “Yes, with a bite. Nearly tore his throat out—all for a sip of immortality.”

The crack of wood echoes. Cody shivers, like he’s about to sprout fur and fangs. Then he takes a deep, obvious breath, controlling himself. Drops the broken paintbrush on the palette.

Part of Simon tenses, wary of the furious werewolf. Another part of him is soothed by the anger. “Did your pack tell the old stories?”

Simon used to envy the werewolf mating bond, when he was young and foolish. Chosen magic, binding souls in strength and comfort. Werewolf mates always know where the other is, and they can speak telepathically when in wolf form. Mated werewolves are more stable, even without a larger pack. The bond is sealed with a bite that doesn’t heal like a vampire’s bite. It leaves a scar as visible proof.

If Simon had a bond like that, Dima never would have left him.

The trouble comes when werewolves look outside their own kin. If a werewolf mates to a regular human, that’s usually for love. But mating to a witch can grant the witch’s magic to the werewolf.

And mating to a vampire grants immortality—with none of the downsides. Power-hungry alphas see vampires as tempting targets.

That’s supposed to be over, now that the treaty forbids forced claims.

“I know the old stories,” Cody says, voice still rough. Tension tightens his eyes. “But claiming a mate by force isn’t right.”

“The shadow-gift is meant to be given, not taken.” Simon turns away from Cody’s furious sympathy, towards the controlled chaos of the painted squares. “Many things have changed over the years, but never that. When Dima made me, he offered his veins willingly. I drank just as willingly.”

Simon has never regretted that choice.

“What happened to Francisco?” Cody asks.

“He couldn’t stand being chained to a wolf all his nights, and he wanted revenge,” Simon says. The truth this time. “He killed himself by sunlight, thus dooming the werewolf as well. The werewolf was weak, and Tania slaughtered him easily.”

Cody’s face does something complicated. “I’m sorry,” he says, without recrimination for Simon’s previous lie.

The lie isn't so far from the truth, anyway.

"It was long ago, before the treaty." Simon slips from the armchair and walks towards Cody. "Give me your hand."

Cody frowns but doesn't hesitate this time. Simon doesn't hesitate either, or his impulse will sprout too much meaning in the silence. This isn't an apology for lashing out. This isn't a sign that he cares.

Bending his head, he picks the splinters from Cody's rough palm.

Simon regrets telling the story. He had meant it as a dagger, but instead it's an outstretched hand. Worst of all, Simon feels better. Having someone so angry on his behalf is nice.

Dima had been sympathetic. Comforting. He kissed Simon through the tears and murmured that everything would be okay. Three centuries later, Simon finally got the reassurance that this *wasn't* okay.

He slides another small splinter from Cody's skin.

"What was Francisco like?" Cody asks. His anger is gone, like Simon has pulled it out with each sliver of wood.

Simon flicks the last splinter onto the carpet. Surely he owns a vacuum somewhere. "Francisco was very calm, which could be infuriating. Too sweet for his own good. He was Dima's previous favorite, but he never held that against me."

Cody tenses, pulling back. "What do you mean, favorite?"

Amusement pierces Simon's strange, comforting regret. "What do you think I mean?"

Cody's expression is delightfully appalled. "But he's your sire."

"He's not my father or anything." Simon grins. "I understand the term has multiple meanings, but that's not how it works."

"Right, of course," Cody says hastily, then scrubs his hand over his face. "Are you still… together?"

"God, no," Simon says—and for once, that answer doesn't even hurt. Cody's bewilderment is too beautiful. Simon slumps into his armchair. "Enough about my ancient romantic history. You have a painting to finish."

Cody stands flabbergasted another moment, then digs a new paintbrush out of the box. Simon settles back to watch, feeling better than he has in weeks. Years.

Maybe Cody is the ally Simon needs after all. Which is why Simon doesn't leave the room to dial Kimiko's number. He's spent enough time poring through his would-be assassin's belongings. Time to investigate further.

"Hello, you've reached Mistress Kimiko's number," Andrea answers. "What's your name, and do you have an appointment?"

Andrea is one of Kimiko's assistants. Kimiko still refuses to learn how cell phones work. It means Simon can never tell her anything important via text.

He has his own audience this time. Across the room, Cody half-turns, but continues painting. He can surely hear everything.

"I don't need an appointment." Simon curls his feet up on the chair. "This is Simon."

Andrea acknowledges him curtly, then there's a flurry of closing doors. A brief beat of club music. Then quiet, and Kimiko's voice on speakerphone. "Dear friend, are you calling to apologize for the mess you made in my basement?"

"Not until you apologize for your lax background checks," Simon says cheerfully, not expecting any apology. They're both old enough to know that not all incidents can be prevented. "On that note, I'd like to see your guest book for the nights of Lawrence's previous visits."

Lawrence's notebooks tell the same story as his garlic-strewn bedroom. Not a hunter, not trained. A lone human, aware of vampires and terrified of them, until that terror somehow turned into an effective plan.

Simon wants to know every other vampire Lawrence might have spoken to. The Broken Cross's guest book is the next logical lead.

"My guest book doesn't leave my office," Kimiko says. "But if you visit, you can look at it. As a favor."

Disappointing, but not worth arguing. "Luckily, you still owe me two. Thanks, Kimiko."

"Someday you'll owe me. Someday!" she declares. Then her voice goes distant. "End the call for me, thank you, dear, and put on that podcast thing again—"

The call ends.

"Another field trip?" Cody asks, filling in a new square.

"To the Broken Cross." The prospect makes Simon more nervous than expected. Returning to the scene of his attack, still weakened. But he won't be alone, and having a werewolf in his shadow doesn't seem as terrible anymore. "We'll go three nights from now. I hope you have something to wear."

Besides, taking Cody clubbing should be fun.

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Chapter 12

Cody

Pulling into the parking garage, Cody wishes he had a larger team. The garage is looming and shadowy. The Broken Cross will be even worse—clubs are nightmares to scout in the best-case scenarios. Returning Simon to the literal scene of the crime goes against Cody's every instinct. Especially since Simon isn't fully recovered.

Then there's… everything else about this outing.

"You're brooding," Simon muses from the passenger seat. "We never did establish brooding protocols."

"I'll add that to my calendar." Cody cranes around to back into a parking space. Avoiding looking at Simon is easy. Can't look at Simon while he's parking.

"I appreciate you escorting me here," Simon says, with such sincerity that he has to be facetious. "I know you aren't thrilled. But nobody knows I'm here. Even Kimiko isn't expecting me on a certain night."

"Just stay alert and stay by me." Cody turns off the car, still not looking at Simon. "Wait here for a minute."

"Of course," Simon says cooperatively. Why does he sound so suspicious when he cooperates?

Cody slips out to inspect their surroundings. Not many vehicles on this level—makes sense, the fee is exorbitant. But it's across the street from the Broken Cross, and Tobias was able to get the blueprint, which is what matters. Cody knows the location of every stairwell and elevator.

Bracing himself, Cody raps the passenger window. "All clear."

Simon pours gracefully out, and Cody can't look away this time. The vampire's dark gray tank top is tight enough to be painted onto his slender form. His red leather pants are, impossibly, even tighter. Combined with the obnoxious combat boots…

He's distracting as hell, and Cody looks way too old for him.

Cody's own wardrobe can't match the 'painfully obvious vampires' vibe of the Broken Cross, so he opted for jeans, a black tee, and his

leather jacket.

All right, maybe the jacket isn't far off the mark. It had been a statement piece when Cody bought it at age twenty. He'd wanted to look badass and thought an excess of buckles and zippers would help. While he'd been wrong, the jacket had worn to his shape over the years, and nostalgia won't let him part with it.

Besides, it covers up the gun strapped to his side.

"Ready?" Simon asks, stretching his arms. His profile has an ethereal edge in the artificial light.

Cody yanks his gaze away. "Stay close," he says unnecessarily, and leads the way from the parking garage.

The Broken Cross looks almost subtle from the outside. Just a battered brick building. The white neon sign above the door reads simply *BC*. A shuttered ticket booth boasts a banner about concerts on Friday nights.

Tonight is Saturday, but heavy music still pulses from within. Red spotlights flash erratically through the open door. Half a dozen people wait in line outside, human by the smell of them. Makes sense—there aren't enough vampires, witches, or werewolves in the city to support a nightclub without more mundane patronage.

Some of the humans look like they're cosplaying as vampires, though. Simon cuts to the front, and nobody complains.

The bouncer is human too, but she smells of incense and electric magic. A witch. Her eyes narrow at Cody's approach, no doubt recognizing his nature. Cody hangs back a pace, scanning the line, the streets, and the rooftops.

Simon whispers to the bouncer. Whatever he says works. The bouncer waves them through without further questioning.

The music pounds louder indoors. Wincing, Cody keeps his senses primed for any hint of danger. The club is spacious, warm with the heartbeats of at least a hundred people drunk on alcohol and adrenaline. Most of the heartbeats are fast and human. A handful are slow. Dead. The crowd clusters towards the bar and spreads out on the dance floor and plush booths.

Too many eyes turn towards Simon. Cody bristles.

Simon arrows to a side door, blocked by another employee. A vampire this time, wearing fishnets, blood-red lipstick, and a *Security* lanyard.

Her glare at Cody is bone-chilling. "Who is this?"

If Cody was in wolf form, his hackles would be rising. But the woman's animosity is directed towards him, not Simon, so that isn't a problem.

“My guest,” Simon answers sharply. “Nice to see you, Andrea. Is Kimiko available?”

“No.” Andrea’s expression doesn’t change. Maybe that’s just her face. “Ten more minutes, probably. She took a couple of blood-bags downstairs an hour ago.”

Simon seems unphased by her attitude—except for the tension just below the surface. “Tell her I’m here when she’s ready, please.”

“Of course. Per Kimiko’s orders, you don’t need an appointment,” Andrea says. “But your *guest* will stay upstairs.”

Cody bites back his protest, because Simon is already snapping back, “Would you say that if he was a vampire? Or even a human?”

His voice has a cold, imperious quality that Cody’s never heard before. He’s much shorter than Andrea but seems to tower over the entire crowd. An ancient, vicious presence—standing up for Cody. Like a baby bird defending a wolf.

Andrea flinches back. “Does that matter?”

“You tell me,” Simon says, his smile razor-sharp.

Without another word, Andrea turns on her heel and exits through the side door.

Simon glares after her, still clearly angry. His ire is more endearing when it isn’t directed towards Cody—but de-escalation is probably smart. Curious eyes still peer from the crowd.

“No need to be angry,” Cody says, leaning closer and speaking quietly. “I’m not here to make friends.”

“You don’t get to decide whether I’m angry!” Simon’s brow furrows. Anger looks too appealing on him. “Just like a child barely a fifth of my age doesn’t get to insult my guests. You’re with me, and I want you here, and that’s what matters.”

Unavoidable math dances through Cody’s head. “I’m one sixteenth your age. What does that make me?”

“Insufferable,” Simon answers without missing a beat.

Cody bites the inside of his cheek, trying not to laugh. “We should find a booth. People are staring.”

“I’ll show them something to stare at,” Simon mutters darkly. He extends an imperious hand. “Dance with me.”

Cody must have misheard. The music, the crowd, the blended scent of wine and bottled blood tugging his sense of danger. But his ears are too keen, his attention on Simon too sharp to misunderstand.

“I’m on the clock,” Cody says, falling back on the easiest response.

“So?” Simon wiggles his hand, which is ridiculous. Then he licks his lips, which isn’t. “You’re my bodyguard. Guard my body.”

Red light spills over Simon's bare arm. The line of his clavicle. What would it be like dancing against Simon's cold, undead body? Cody is tempted to find out. Which is yet another reason to shut this down.

The foremost being that Simon doesn't mean it seriously. He wants attention. He wants to make a scene. Cody has proven that the bratty antics won't drive him away.

Atwood Security policy is a distant third reason in Cody's swimming mind.

"That's not appropriate," Cody says stiffly, hiding behind protocol.

Simon tenses, then relaxes into a smile Cody can barely see through. "My apologies."

"I can't be distracted," Cody explains.

Simon perks up. "Am I distracting, Mr. Weston?"

There isn't an answer that won't get Cody into trouble. "You're a fucking brat, Mr. Caley."

Simon beams with terrible glee, and yeah. Distracting is the least of it. Cody suddenly, desperately wants to know what kind of dancer Simon would be. What have the centuries crafted him into? Calculated, frenetic, intimate, or free?

Movement hooks Cody's attention. He steps forward on instinct, then back in recognition.

"The boss is ready," Andrea says, still glaring daggers at Cody.

Simon's good mood holds. "Lead the way."

The crowd is light, but Cody instinctively touches Simon's shoulder to keep him close. A mistake. He isn't supposed to touch Simon.

But Simon leans closer.

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Chapter 13

Simon

A giddy pair of humans pass them on the stairs. One man, one woman, with matching limps. Obviously not a threat, but that makes them more suspicious. Simon is on edge tonight.

There are just so many humans at the Broken Cross. Simon's stomach twists with a thirst no bottled blood can quench.

And he pushed too far teasing Cody. Simon feels guilty about that, plus annoyed for feeling guilty. The werewolf is too nice.

Fucking bastard.

The stairs lead to a small, opulent office. Silk panels line the walls, and diamond chandeliers drip from the blood-red ceiling. The air reeks of blood and sex. Nose wrinkling, Cody moves to a corner with a better angle.

Kimiko sits behind her sturdy desk, reapplying lipstick. Her updo and violet corset look pristine. "Simon, Simon, Simon. I've been looking forward to your visit, but I didn't realize you'd adopted a new pet."

She lacks Andrea's venom, but Simon still bristles. Cody is *his* bodyguard. Other people don't get to insult him. "I thought I should bring my own, since you never share yours."

"Those?" Kimiko gestures towards the stairs. "They aren't pets, they're snacks."

Simon settles onto the chair across the desk. Relaxing, not resting. The thirst is fading, now that he isn't surrounded by pulsing hearts. The only living creature in the room is Cody.

"Can I see your guest book?" Simon asks.

Kimiko pouts her freshly painted lips. "No small talk? No introductions?"

"This is Cody, my… temporary assistant." Simon's eyes narrow at Kimiko's familiar calculation. "He's off-limits!"

"Pity," Kimiko says, hand on her chest. "He's so… tall."

Cody smiles politely. "Nice to meet you, ma'am."

He doesn't seem nearly as disconcerted by Kimiko's flirting as he

was by Simon's request to dance. Simon isn't sure how he feels about that.

"How have you been, dear friend?" Kimiko asks.

Simon dislikes that question. "I've recovered. Thank you for helping me that night."

The werewolf in the corner is a strangely reassuring figure. Bulky under the leather jacket, uneasy attention wandering the entire room. Cody knows how weak Simon is right now, but Kimiko doesn't need to.

Clearly delighted, Kimiko rummages through a desk drawer. "Oh, did thanking me hurt? I'm just glad you're safe and sound."

"How about you?" Simon asks.

Kimiko hands over a tablet. "I've been very well. Do you want details?"

"I can smell them," Simon mutters, pulling the tablet closer. Beneath Kimiko's peal of laughter, he hears a faint snort from Cody.

"Such a prude." Kimiko's lavender fingernail taps the screen. "Here's my guest book database. The dates of Lawrence Baird's visits are bookmarked—just tap here and here for the table."

"I thought you hated technology," Simon says. "This is very technology."

"This is a guest book," Kimiko insists. "Not one of those terrible telephones."

"Can I copy this?" Simon asks. His memory is good, but there are a lot of names. Nothing's standing out so far, and he doesn't want to miss anything.

"I suppose," Kimiko says.

Simon uses his terrible telephone to photograph each screen of names from the nights Lawrence visited the Broken Cross. "Any chance I can get the background checks, too?"

"Absolutely not," Kimiko says, cheerful but firm. Then she points to two names. "These two have ties to the Crescent Blade. You've had dealings with them, right?"

"I spoke with their Kenyan branch during treaty negotiations," Simon says. "I've never had contact with their American branch."

Kimiko leans back in her throne-like chair. "They're the most powerful local hunters' guild, but they've grown terribly dull. All positive reinforcement, no vigilante justice. Besides, their roster is public, and your would-be assassin isn't on it. But they're the most suspicious names I can think of."

"Thank you," Simon says, sincerely this time. He returns the tablet.

“I’m sorry again for making a mess at your club.”

“We’ve had worse. No, don’t ask what the worse was!” Kimiko’s grin stiffens. Almost a perfect mask. But Simon knows her well. He sees her hesitation, before she asks one more question he wishes she wouldn’t. “How long did he stick around this time?”

Dima, of course.

The funny thing is Simon hasn’t missed Dima the way he usually does. Too much else to think about. “You know him. He’ll vanish as soon as the next distraction calls.”

“I don’t know him. All these years, and perhaps only you do.” Kimiko rises to her feet. “Stay and dance a while. Order your pet a few drinks—my treat.”

The clear dismissal is welcome. Ungratefully, Simon itches to leave his friend’s watchful gaze. “*Thank you*, Kimiko.”

He leaves the office with Cody close at his heels. Funny. A fucking werewolf is more reliable than Simon’s own sire.

Hopefully the guest book logs will turn up more answers. Or at least new questions.

When they’re upstairs, out of range of Kimiko or Andrea’s keen hearing, Simon murmurs, “Apologies for her poor manners.”

“It’s fine,” Cody murmurs back. “Your friend seems fun.”

Something about that response rankles Simon’s nerves. He suddenly wants to dance. Blow off steam. Shove aside his loneliness. But he shouldn’t push Cody’s good temper, or his own unreliable strength.

Besides, he can’t stay around with so many living heartbeats. The thirst will overwhelm him until he’s tempted to pick someone to feed from. What if they’re poisoned again? Simon’s careful rules can’t keep him safe. No first-timers. No repeats. No werewolves.

“We’ll head back now,” Simon says, and Cody nods, sticking close.

Leaving the club is a relief. Simon feels safer under the open sky, with only Cody near enough to touch. He can’t sense any other nonhumans nearby.

“What are you thinking?” Simon asks, because he wants to avoid his own thoughts, and Cody is definitely thinking about something. Even as his gaze roves the streets, his expression turns inwards.

For a moment, Cody seems like he might not answer. That would be fair. They aren’t exactly friends. Barely friendly at all. Then Cody’s roving gaze pauses briefly on Simon. “I didn’t know you were involved with the treaty.”

Lovely. A history lesson. “A minor role. I mediated with certain parties.”

“Not the werewolves,” Cody says, amused.

“I didn’t want fleas.” Simon watches carefully enough to catch Cody’s stifled grin. “I represented our kind to a few hunters’ guilds, and certain reluctant individuals among our own people. Why do you ask?”

“I still don’t know much about you,” Cody says. “I guess I’m curious.”

Simon isn’t used to talking about himself. It’s been years since he had a real conversation with someone who didn’t already know him.

“There are two main reasons the treaty council wanted me as a liaison,” Simon says. This was common knowledge, before it became history.

“What are those?” Cody asks obligingly as they near the parking garage.

“I spoke with the guilds because I appear, as vampires go, fairly nonthreatening.”

Cody snorts. “I can believe that.”

“Excuse me.”

“No offense meant.” Cody grins. “You’ve got that whole… eternally youthful thing going on.”

Other adjectives lurk beneath those words. Simon chooses not to dig them up. “That was the idea. Can you imagine Kimiko negotiating? The woman is a menace. Not that she would agree to help—she definitely misses unauthorized predation.”

“I can believe that,” Cody says. “What’s the second reason?”

“Simple. The other vampires know I *am* threatening.” Snapping fingers, rushing flames. Simon wilts, remembering himself. “Or I was at the time. I’m not much to fear at the moment. But I assure you, when not poisoned, I’m quite intimidating.”

“Really,” Cody says, too amused.

“Believe me or not,” Simon says loftily. God, he’s saying more to Cody than he’s said in what feels like decades.

At the parking garage, Simon reaches for the door—and Cody catches him by the shoulder. His hand is shockingly warm on Simon’s bare skin.

“Me first,” Cody says. When he moves forward, his leather jacket brushes Simon’s arm.

Briefly dazed, Simon follows Cody into the quiet maze of cars. He doesn’t remember when he stopped hating and fearing Cody’s touch. Maybe it’s that jacket. The leather just really fits Cody’s broad shoulders.

Francisco always teased Simon's dramatic taste in clothing.

Fifty feet from the car, Cody stops short. The garage is packed with vehicles, the nearest heartbeat across the level. Nobody in sight, so what—

The telltale footstep skids at the same instant Cody grabs him. Those large hands aren't gentle now, but Simon still isn't afraid. Not until Cody shoves him behind an SUV, so fast his head spins.

A sharp crack. Another. The scent of blood.

For one blazing instant, every solid inch of Cody pins Simon to the car. "Don't move," Cody whispers in his ear.

Simon's hand itches for his own gun, but instead of struggling against the restraint, he melts into it. His mouth waters for the blood. He wants to trust Cody.

Then Cody's a foot away, gun drawn, eyes closed. Listening. They hear footsteps at the same time—running away. Not towards them.

And Simon realizes the blood is Cody's.

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Chapter 14

Cody

Cody braces behind the SUV, every sense ablaze. His upper arm stings with the gunshot—nothing serious. The bullet hadn't been silver. The pain is just the sharpest edge of his fury. His quarry runs, and Cody surges in chase.

He only caught a glimpse of the woman before she shot him. She's wearing a black mask, and there's something off about her movements. Like she's never done this before.

A snarl breaks from his throat.

The echo halts him in his tracks. That was a true snarl, shaped by his lengthening jaw. Fur prickles his shoulders, stretching down to his wounded arm. His grip adjusts so he can pull the trigger even with his growing claws. The enemy's footsteps race towards the stairs, ducking behind cars.

Cody's every instinct screams to chase, devour, avenge. Discard his gun and rip his enemy apart with his bare hands. Not for hurting him. For threatening Simon. She has to pay in blood.

His nerves sing for him to finish the shift.

But Simon's cold, dead scent keeps Cody rooted in place. A reminder of his purpose. He's a bodyguard, not an attack dog. His job is protection, not revenge. Cody inhales, shaky with rage.

Then he looks over his shoulder and meets Simon's eyes—wary. Distrustful.

Simon must see Cody as he is. An uncontrolled monster, just as dangerous as the fleeing assailant. Simon's dark glare silences the screaming of Cody's instincts. Cody takes a deep breath. Exhales.

His shoulders tickle with vanishing fur, and his jaw settles into place.

"Stay down," Cody says, voice rough.

Simon folds his arms, a strangely defensive posture given his usual self-control. "I heard her running, too. She's already gone."

"There could be others," Cody says. "I need to clear the area, then lead us to your car."

Simon looks like he wants to argue, but thankfully just nods.

Time to follow protocol, as much as possible. Usually, Cody would have called the cops already. That isn't an option when he's guarding a vampire.

Gun held low, Cody cautiously inspects their surroundings. This floor of the parking garage is quiet. One floor up, a family bickers. One floor down, a group of drunk partiers giggles incessantly, hopefully with a designated driver.

There are security cameras overhead—all dark and motionless. One is visibly fractured. This attack was planned, but not very far in advance.

No more threats for now. Cody holsters his gun, tense, and returns to Simon's side.

Simon hasn't moved from his place against the SUV. He turns away, and even in profile his expression is blank. Pale and soulless as he looked the night they met. Nothing of the warm, almost flirtatious spirit Cody's become strangely accustomed to.

Simon's fingernails dig into his bare arms.

"Are you okay?" Cody asks, heart jumping. Fuck—he should have examined Simon first. If he missed Simon getting hurt—

Simon flinches away. His eyes are dilated, with deep red pupils. "I'm not hurt," he says, every syllable sharp. "But you are."

That's when Cody remembers the sting in his upper arm, and the blood sliding to his wrist.

The pain is negligible. The bullet only punched through muscle, and the bleeding has nearly stopped. Werewolves heal quickly. Two days from now, there won't even be a scar.

But right now, Cody's still bleeding, within arm's reach of a vampire. His internal sense of danger readjusts. One threat has fled, and another is here. A cold-blooded predator Cody wants to protect above his own skin.

Because that's his job. Of course. Cody's a professional.

"I didn't ask about me," Cody says, grinning. "Are you okay?"

Simon's eyes close. His blank expression is a mask, barely papering over his hunger. When his eyes open again, he looks vulnerable, caught in the force of his own instinct. "I'll resist the temptation," he murmurs.

Maybe more than instinct.

No. Cody's pulse quickens, not from fear. He has to be imagining the desire in Simon's red eyes—but he isn't imagining how much he likes the idea. Somehow, this barely dressed vampire craving his blood is the hottest man Cody's ever met. Protection is only the

surface shape of Cody's desire.

Professional. Keep this professional. Cody yanks himself back to reality. "I need to get you back."

"Lead the way," Simon says, still tense and controlled.

As they edge back to the car, Cody's neck prickles. But whenever he glances over, Simon is looking far away. His body is tense, all slender lines of coiled energy, and the leather pants aren't half as distracting as his parted lips.

Cody checks the car before opening the passenger door. "I want you to duck down until we reach the highway."

Any desire in Simon's eyes burns away with indignation. "You're the one who got shot. Maybe you should duck down." Then he hesitates. "Can you drive with your injury?"

Cody shrugs. Bad move, given the healing gunshot to the shoulder. "I've driven with worse."

Simon frowns, skeptical, but folds into the car, out of sight. Cody takes one last view of their surroundings. Listening carefully, he hears nothing more than a drunken argument one floor down. Then he gets in the car too.

The seatbelt feels tight over his chest as he exits the parking garage. Every sense fixates on the vampire crouching at his side, a heady blend of fear and foolish want. Cody's hindbrain keeps circling around the memory of painting the wall. Simon's cool fingers picking splinters from his palm. His present pain is an afterthought.

Cody forces his attention onto the job. The attacker fled, but she or an accomplice could be waiting in a getaway car. There could be a second sniper on an adjacent rooftop. Every moment of quiet heightens the anticipation of attack.

But there's no follow-up. They hit the highway, and Cody says, "You can sit up."

"Great," Simon says, muffled, before sitting up with an exaggerated stretch. "I'm too old for this shit."

He fastens his seatbelt, then cracks a window open. Presses his face to the glass, which doesn't hold his reflection. Nervous tension still thrums through the car, thick as the smell of blood.

If Cody finds the person behind this, he'll rip their throat out without a second thought. That knowledge scares him. He almost shifted in the garage, and if those security cameras were still working, it could have been disastrous.

Not as bad as letting Simon get hurt would have been. Satisfaction mingles with Cody's anger. He kept Simon safe. Simon is fine, and Cody is taking him back home where they belong—

For fuck's sake, Cody. Professional.

"Did you recognize her?" Cody asks, because unraveling this attack serves his professional and unprofessional needs alike.

"I didn't see her," Simon says. "Did you?"

"Briefly, but she was wearing a mask." Cody frowns, struggling to recall details. Eyewitness recollection is tricky—at least when it comes to the eyes. "Definitely human. Her scent wasn't clear."

"Another human." Simon rolls the window down a bit more, and air whips in from the chilly highway. "They used to be easier to deal with."

Cody almost offers to turn up the AC. Then he remembers Simon is a vampire. He isn't susceptible to temperature; he's trying to clear the scent of Cody's blood from the car.

"How did she know we would be there?" Cody asks. "That wasn't an accident."

Simon folds his arms around himself again. "I don't know."

"Could Kimiko have set it up?" Cody presses. "Or someone else at the club?"

"I don't know," Simon repeats, plaintive. It's an odd sound from a centuries-old vampire. "Not Kimiko, but I can't rule out anyone else. A motive would narrow it down, if I had one. This has to be personal, considering everything else. I just don't know why."

Cody's grip creaks on the steering wheel. They'd had an understanding that Cody needs accurate information to do his job. Apparently not. He glares out at the flaring headlights. "You specifically told me this wasn't personal. Were you going to tell me about 'everything else' at some point?"

"I wasn't planning on it." Passing lights flit along Simon's bare arm and catch in his hair. "But plans can change."

"They'd fucking better," Cody growls. "I told you the day we met—I won't ask much of you. I just need you to help me do my job. I need you to be honest with me."

"I don't trust you," Simon says, matter-of-fact and tired.

The ensuing silence is deafening. Cody is tense and uncontrolled again, but it's not his wolf this time. Just his own emotions bristling below the surface. A deep breath fights down his anger. His unreasonable hurt.

He must sound ridiculous demanding Simon's compliance. Cody's a twenty-eight-year-old idiot acting like he knows everything. Yeah, he knows his job, but his job is guarding vacationing business moguls and minor celebrities. Not protecting gorgeous, ancient vampire twinks from assassins.

“It’s not about you,” Simon says suddenly. “I don’t trust anyone.”

The abrupt softening of tone is dizzying. Simon seems as erratic and vulnerable as Cody feels tonight, their emotions feeding off each other. Maybe Cody is emanating more violent energy than usual, or Simon is more sensitive than the humans Cody usually hangs out with. All the more reason to stay in control.

“I’m sorry,” Cody says. “I shouldn’t expect you to.”

“You’ve done nothing wrong. As much as I like to nitpick.”

“Nothing wrong? Not even ruining your library wall?”

“I like your painting,” Simon says, which is a terrible sign. He must be woozy with bloodlust.

Or he’s trying to distract Cody.

“Why do you think this is personal?” Cody asks.

Simon rolls the window an inch up. Then an inch down. “Two things. The first could be a coincidence. Did you ever hear about the treaty crisis twenty years ago?”

That would be like yesterday for a vampire, but Cody struggles to reach vague childhood memories. “Was that the vampire who got murdered?”

Simon fidgets with the window again. “That was my fledge-sister Tania.”

It’s all Cody can do to keep his eyes on the road and his hands on the steering wheel. He wants to hold Simon close—if he would allow it—and offer any comfort he can. But that isn’t what Simon’s looking for. There’s a reason Simon is revealing this.

“What happened?” Cody asks.

“I don’t know.” Simon sounds worse than sad—he sounds resigned. “We hadn’t been close in years. A human killed her. The council never caught them.”

The details are coming back now, such as they are. Cody’s pack leaders recounted the aftermath more than the murder itself. A group of bloodthirsty vampires using a flimsy excuse to try overthrowing the treaty.

“Do you think this is related?” Cody asks. He should be angry that Simon kept this from him, but he’s just relieved Simon is saying it now. There are clearly reasons for the vampire’s reclusiveness.

“Humans don’t tend to have twenty years of patience,” Simon points out. “You have to understand—I’ve known so many people who’ve died. Francisco and Tania aren’t even my only dead fledge-siblings, just the ones I cared about.” Simon takes a deep breath. He hasn’t spoken this much to Cody before. “Is this related to Tania? Or to Kimiko’s sister, who died fifty years before that? Where do patterns

stop, and where does paranoia begin?"

"You can have both," Cody says, which he doesn't intend to be funny. But he doesn't mind that Simon laughs. Talking about death with a vampire is strange. "You said there were two things. What's the second?"

Simon slumps back in the seat. "That's the troublesome part. When Lawrence Baird attacked me, he knew my name. He shouldn't have."

"Shit." Cody peers into the darkness, as if the landscape whipping past them holds any answers. "Did you find anything else in the stuff from his apartment?"

"Nothing that led to me. Just paranoid ramblings about vampires stalking the shadows." Simon chuckles darkly. "Maybe two centuries ago, that would have been more accurate. He knew he sounded crazy, too. There were notes about therapists. He made an appointment six months ago but canceled it. The superstitious rambling stopped three months ago, and he started withdrawing cash and booking long-distance bus tickets."

"A paranormal shopping trip," Cody says. "So, all the fake stuff came first, and then… what, he found something real?"

"Or something real found him," Simon says quietly. The words are chilling, like the wind whistling through the window.

Instead of narrowing down, the suspect list has widened. Lawrence could have run into a vampire, a witch, a hunter, or even a werewolf. Someone with a grudge and not much care for treaty secrecy laws.

"Can I look through everything too?" Cody asks. "I might pick up on something you missed."

"I thought you weren't a detective. But sure."

"Just doing my job," Cody says, even though that doesn't feel true. "I'll see if Tobias can get security footage of tonight's attacker. His data team is good at identifying people."

"Put it on my tab," Simon says absently. He lowers the window an inch more. The wind is almost loud enough to cover Simon's next muttered words: "Fuck, why do you smell so good?"

Cody jumps, and glances over at Simon—whose eyes widen in mortification.

"Fuck off," Simon groans, covering his face.

Despite everything, Cody grins as he turns onto the exit. He feels settled inside himself. Not happy, but right. His wolf likes protecting Simon.

And Simon thinks he smells good.

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Chapter 15

Simon

Simon's hunger settles into a tolerable ache by the time Cody allows him into the house. His eyes are likely still red, but he's no fledgling. He can control himself.

What he can't control is the guilt. Like a debt looming over him. Cody didn't protect Simon as a favor, and the economy of favors doesn't include werewolves, anyway. But the feeling gnawing at Simon is jarringly similar.

Cody locks the garage door behind them. There's wariness in his gaze. Understandable. Most people aren't the bite-chasers at the Broken Cross, eager to open their veins for the first willing predator.

If Cody were willing…

No. Keep this professional. Even if Cody were willing, the bite holds too much vulnerability. Simon shouldn't be fantasizing when Cody is injured. Bad enough that he felt so comfortable talking about Tania.

"Follow me," Simon says, before he can think better of it.

The first-floor bathroom is neutral territory. It's near the library with the garden mural. Dark granite, brass fixtures, and a mirror in an ornate oval frame. Decorating his home with mirrors is amusing, beyond the practical considerations. The monthly housekeepers are the ones most likely to use the restroom.

That's why there's a first aid kit under the sink. In case anyone gets hurt while Simon sleeps the day away.

Simon drags the kit onto the counter. By the dust, none of the service employees have gotten hurt in the five years since they last replaced it. Simon unlatches the heavy plastic and sorts through supplies. He thinks at first that Cody won't follow, until he hears footsteps above the crinkling of gauze packs.

Cody's presence crowds the doorframe, and his expression is still cautious. Simon is cornered, outnumbered, caught between Cody and Cody's reflection.

And he's weak. That's why Cody was hurt.

“What’s this?” Cody asks. Doubtless he knows what a first aid kit is, so he’s really asking what the fuck Simon is doing.

Great question. Patching up Cody’s arm won’t patch up Simon’s guilt.

Simon braces himself to resist the scent of blood. He’s not a fledgling, but he’s not a saint either. “I can clean the wound for you.”

Cody’s brow dips, skeptical. “No need. It’s already healing.”

A sealed antiseptic wipe crinkles in Simon’s hand. The polite rejection stings, and he feels foolish for offering. Even more foolish for being disappointed. Of course, werewolves heal fast. Simon had just forgotten how fast.

He snaps the kit shut. “Never mind, then.”

“Fuck.” Cody scrubs his hand over his face and takes one step into the bathroom. “I could use help getting the jacket off. The lining is stuck to the blood.”

Simon should have been a jester. His relief at doing something reaches new depths of foolishness. After a lightning-fast assessment of their relative heights, he hops onto the counter.

“Very well. Come here.”

Cody hesitates understandably. Then he draws closer and turns his wounded arm towards Simon. “Thanks. I could rip it off, but I like this jacket.”

Simon holds his breath, which barely lessens the rich scent of Cody’s blood. He grips the back and shoulder of the jacket, towards the damaged right side. The leather is warm with Cody’s body heat.

Gingerly, Cody twists his good arm out. The movement brings him closer. He grabs the cuff of the bloody sleeve, and together he and Simon ease the jacket off. Fabric pulls against tacky blood. Fine hairs audibly tear from Cody’s arm.

It’s all so mortal. Physical. Undignified. Simon’s fingers clench like claws in the warm leather, guilt and hunger warring for his attention.

The bullet hole is a new, pink scar in the meat of Cody’s triceps. Rivers of darkening blood cake his arm to the back of his hand. Not nearly as sweet as it would be fresh from the vein—but Simon wants it.

Maybe he’s starving after months of bottled blood. Maybe Cody just smells too damn good. Simon imagines lifting Cody’s wrist and lapping the bloody traces from his bones.

Instead, Simon offers the torn jacket. “I can have this cleaned.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Cody takes the jacket, leaving Simon’s hand colder. “The lining is probably ruined, but I’ll just get it replaced.”

The man's competent self-sufficiency is galling.

Simon wants to clean the blood from Cody's arm too, but he can't pretend that it's to assuage his guilt. Not with the way his cold heart trembles with Cody's proximity.

The guilt isn't that Cody got hurt protecting him.

The guilt is for wanting to be protected.

"I should thank you," Simon says softly. Maybe words will be clearer than gestures. "You didn't have to do this."

Cody cocks his head, clearly assessing. "It's my job."

"You still didn't have to," Simon says, sharp and defensive. "I'm grateful you did."

In the dim bathroom light, Cody looks older than his years. Something shifts in the air, as if Simon's hesitation places Cody on steadier ground. Cody turns to fully face him, close enough that his hip nearly brushes Simon's knee.

"It's my job to keep my principal out of harm's way. Even if I hate them." Cody grins. "But I don't hate you as much as I expected."

The words are unbelievably fond.

Simon inhales. He needs the breath to speak, and taking in the scent of Cody's blood and sweat is a dizzying side effect. "I suppose you're tolerable as well."

"I need to report this incident to Tobias," Cody says, his words quiet and his gaze almost tactile in its intensity. "But there's one thing… Do we need to revise that no-touching protocol?"

He offers his unbloodied left hand, palm up.

"I would permit that," Simon says, the honesty prickling like sunlight through a silk curtain. He places his fingers in the molten cup of Cody's palm.

Cody caresses his hand, so gently one would never suspect those blunt fingertips could sharpen. His dark eyes still fix on Simon. For a moment, Simon is certain Cody is going to kiss him.

And Simon will permit that, too.

Cody steps back, avoiding Simon's eyes. "I should report and clean up. Call if you need anything."

Simon sits silent, motionless on the counter, as Cody flees.

Then he slumps back, shoulders and head thumping the wall next to the empty mirror. Fucking hell. This is absurd. Simon should be focused on tonight's attack, but all he can think about is the handsy werewolf whose scent still fills his lungs.

Cody is attractive, obviously. If he wasn't a werewolf… If he wasn't Simon's bodyguard… If he wasn't merely twenty-eight years old… If

he wasn't clearly wary of Simon's bloodlust…

If Simon wasn't a twisted mess of—in the modern parlance—abandonment issues…

If Simon had met Cody during his youth, maybe in a tavern, or backstage after a show, they would have already fucked.

Simon doesn't trust Cody, but some cold lonely part of him desperately wants to. Which is bad, because the people Simon's close to get hurt. Or they leave. Immortality lasts too long to carry that grief and loneliness.

Simon inhales Cody's lingering scent again, though he doesn't need to speak now. Then he pulls out his phone and types a message.

Sorry to bother you,

He erases that. Pathetic.

Any updates?

Better. He sends the text message to Dima. Simon getting hurt is one thing, but he refuses to let Cody take another bullet. The man is only twenty-eight. He has no idea what he's doing.

Disregard the fact that Simon has no idea what he's doing either.

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Chapter 16

Cody

Thoughts as fluid and fleeting as the running water, Cody scrubs his arm. Blood clings to the white porcelain of the guest room sink, before sliding down the drain.

He should have kissed Simon. He should have danced with him at the Broken Cross. Even though every rational analysis says he was right to pull away. Cody's protective instincts twist and snarl, unsatisfied. Like he's meant to guard Simon's emotions, not just his physical well-being.

Atwood Security forbids fraternizing with principals. A distracted guard is a liability. On any other job, Cody would call Tobias and request to be replaced.

But there's no replacement for this assignment, because Simon is a vampire. Which is the other reason kissing him is a bad idea. Simon's eyes were red with thirst for Cody's blood.

Feeding off of people is bad. Cody learned that from the cradle—all werewolves do, otherwise they get locked up or put down. Vampires are trapped by their nature, feeding on human blood to survive, but that doesn't make it a good thing.

Even if those humans at the Broken Cross looked plenty enthusiastic. Even if Cody was tempted to indulge Simon's bloodlust, just moments ago.

Shutting off the faucet, Cody stares at his gleaming bare arm. The bullet wound is healing fast, and all the blood is gone. Cody didn't need to resist or indulge in Simon's bloodlust at all.

Because Simon was in control the entire time. Beneath that lonely fragility, Simon is strong. Far stronger than Cody, who can barely leash his wolf.

The other type of lust is the problem. Did Simon actually want to kiss him, or was that just the scent of blood clouding his desires?

After drying his hands, Cody reviews the full-property security system one more time. Then he takes a deep breath and grabs his phone. Time to… not lie to his boss and best friend. Just conceal some unprofessional truths.

It's four in the morning now. Tobias picks up on the second ring.

"What's the damage?" he asks, voice muffled. Then even more muffled, "Everything's fine, honey, just work stuff." His voice rises to a higher pitch. "Good girl, stay with your mom, Princess." Footsteps, and a door closes.

Cody feels bad. His friend was actually sleeping at home at a normal hour, for once. "We're secure right now," Cody starts, because leading with the gunshot isn't smart. Then he relays the rest of the night's events.

Minus almost kissing his charge on a bathroom counter.

"You didn't shift, right?" Tobias asks.

"I didn't," Cody answers, then winces. "It was close."

"Close is fine. Proud of you, bud." A mug clinks on Tobias's end. "You said Simon's fine. Is anyone else hurt?"

"The attacker is fine, unfortunately. I got grazed by a bullet, but it wasn't silver. It's already healed."

"I'm never getting used to that," Tobias says.

Cody leans back in his chair, flicking through camera feeds. Everything's quiet and dark in the surrounding tree line. "Are you making coffee? Aditi won't like you staying up this early."

"Never getting used to that either. How the fuck do you hear that?" Tobias chuckles. "Stop using my wife as a distraction, and tell me what's bothering you."

Tobias may not understand werewolves, but he understands people.

Cody's unreasonable attraction isn't the only problem. "This attack was a half-assed operation. A single woman with a gun? Plain lead bullets to kill a vampire? Even if they didn't know Simon had protection, that's understaffed for an ambush."

A bag of coffee grounds crinkles. "You said he's still affected by that blood poison. Would a regular gun hurt him in that case?"

"It could slow him down." Cody frowns. "But the first guy is dead. Whoever's responsible would have to know the poisoning part was successful."

"Who would know that?" Tobias asks.

"You, me, the sire, the club owner, any of the club owner's people…" Cody recalls the vampire Andrea's blatant hostility. What if that was more than regular interspecies prejudice? "And anyone they told."

"So, anyone." Tobias sighs. "We're not detectives, but send me the parking garage info and I'll try to look into this woman. No promises."

Cody pauses cycling through the feeds, landing on the well-lit view of the front gate. There's something hesitant in Tobias's voice. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Tobias says—a clear sign of something wrong. "Is the vampire driving you crazy yet?"

"You could say that," Cody hedges. It's true, though not the way Tobias thinks. "He's not as bad as I expected."

"That's good, because the client asked to extend the job another month."

Surprise sparks Cody even more awake. This shouldn't be a surprise, given that the attacks still aren't explained. But Simon hasn't said anything.

Does Simon even know about it? Probably not, given what a frigid asshole Dima seems like. If Simon was Cody's, he wouldn't leave him alone with someone who…

Cody realizes why Tobias was hesitating. "That includes the full moon."

A sip of coffee punctuates Tobias's concern. "I haven't approved the extension yet. We finished clearing up your last job. If this doesn't work for you…"

Cody rises from his desk chair. He needs to pace the room to think. Apparently, he's out of the doghouse, and Tobias is offering a way out. Cody can leave if he can't handle this job anymore. His control over his wolf. His attraction to Simon.

"Approve it," Cody says, barely keeping the snarl from his voice. "I want to see this job through. I can figure out the full moon situation."

There isn't a choice. Cody can't leave while Simon is still in danger.

"Good man," Tobias says, suddenly cheerful. "Not to pressure you, but this Dima is loaded. You're going to like your bonus. As for the full moon, I had a plan for that."

Of course. Tobias has contingency plans for everything. He's a strategic, sensible person.

Unlike Cody, who's a fucking idiot. When he hangs up the phone, nothing's changed. He still can't erase Simon's sharp disappointment from his mind.

Fuck professionalism. Ignoring his attraction won't make it any less distracting. He should have kissed Simon. He should have danced with him. Maybe Simon won't want any of that, after sleeping off the bloodlust and adrenaline. But Cody needs to find out.

Luckily, he can make contingency plans, too.

***

The next evening, Simon doesn't appear with the sunset. Cody isn't worried—really, he isn't. Simon usually sleeps in. Cody just has to throw all his thwarted, not-worried energy into other things.

A jog around the perimeter takes some of the edge off. No sign or scent of intrusion, but Cody takes another two laps to be sure. The surrounding woods are lush, calling Cody to chase the traces of rabbit and squirrel. He wants to shift, but it's more a wistful thought that it would be nice to stretch out. Not a loss of control.

Pesky bugs buzz as the night deepens, and Cody returns to the house. He pauses at the door, listening, but can't hear Simon yet. Scent doesn't help. The entire house smells of Simon, at least on the lower floors.

Cody could forget tonight's plan. If Simon sleeps in for too long, he probably will. Too many hours to think how stupid this is. But for now, Cody heads to the library on the first floor above ground.

This room's murals are soft, sunlit gardens. The rendering is delicate, wistful, enough to make Cody wonder whether Simon misses the sun. Like the other murals in the house, unfinished patches of white interrupt the scene.

Cody kind of likes the empty patches. They leave space for possibility.

The library also contains an old record player, not cheap, not expensive, but in mint condition. Judging by the cabinet behind it, Simon's taste in music is eclectic. Rock, classical, musical theater cast recordings, as recent as the current decade and as old as… Cody isn't sure when records were invented, actually.

He picks a rock band he recognizes and sets the record on the player. After a pause to look up 'how to operate record player' on his phone, he sets down the needle—

—and flinches at the unexpected swell of violins and cellos.

"Okay," Cody says, as the classical instruments play on. Leaning in, he discovers the record doesn't match the case.

A cursory glance indicates *everything* is mis-sorted. Cody considers organizing them for about two seconds before the enormity of the task overwhelms him. He'll have to occupy himself some other way instead.

In the middle of Cody's third set of push-ups, fabric rustles. It's barely audible beneath the lively flute section, even to Cody's sharp ears. He dips for another rep, nose nearly touching the carpet, then sits up.

The push-ups didn't raise his heart rate, but this does. Simon leans

in the doorway, arms crossed in calculated repose. He's as sensual in a sweater and jeans as he was in the red leather pants. Barefoot, his toes just as ashen white as his face. He looks different tonight, no longer quite so stiff and guarded, but not desperately hungry like he was last night. The scent of old bottled blood is faintly detectable.

Simon looks, if Cody isn't completely misreading him, curious.

"That's a weird waltz," Simon comments.

"You have to organize your records." Cody hops up and moves the needle, cutting off the harps or harpsichords or whatever that is. "This is insane."

"I use CDs now. Haven't moved on to streaming, though." Simon lifts his chin, clearly inspecting Cody. "I didn't think werewolves needed to work out. I thought you were just born looking like linebackers and lumberjacks."

Cody refrains from flexing under his t-shirt. "There's a genetic predisposition, but it's just easier for us to bulk up. I'm guessing you're not a gym rat."

"No point," Simon says. "The shadow-gift keeps me the same as ever, unless I were to magic my hair different or something."

"Have you ever tried?" Cody asks, wondering what Simon would look like with shorter hair, or highlights, or rainbow streaks.

Simon grimaces. "Certainly not. Most witches are terrible hairdressers. What's with the music?"

Cody blinks, taken aback by the sharp question. Right. This is the point. Maybe he's misreading Simon's attention. Even if he isn't, this is a bad idea. But Cody's always had problems controlling his instincts.

"I've been thinking about this since I said no at the club." Cody sets the needle back on the record. As the harps and violins sing out again, he extends his hand. "Will you dance with me?"

Simon's lips part softly. The surprise looks good on him. "Excuse me?"

Cody waggles his hand. "You heard me."

"I don't actually want to dance with you," Simon says, even as he steps forward. "I just wanted to annoy Andrea."

"That's a shame. I turned on your vintage record player and everything."

Simon covers his heart in mock indignation. "I bought that in '92! The 1990s aren't vintage!" But he places his hand in Cody's. With the ice-cold touch, his annoyance seems to melt. Simon looks up, searching. "Why are you doing this?"

That's easy. "Because I want to."

“You remember I’m a vampire, right?” Simon asks. “I wanted to drink your blood last night.”

“But you didn’t,” Cody says, closing his hand around Simon’s. Because touching is allowed, now. “Even though I smell delicious.”

Simon is a vampire, sure. He’s also a fickle artist. A disorganized music collector. Equally fond of leather and cashmere. Thoughtful when scamming his way into human apartments. Good with a gun, even when poisoned.

He’s a creature without a pack. Just like Cody.

“What’ll it be?” Cody asks, pulling Simon closer. “Waltz? Polka? Can-can?”

“You’re exhausting,” Simon accuses.

And falling into each other is easy. Simon’s head rests on Cody’s chest, and their hands intertwine. Cody has danced with plenty of people before, but nobody who smells of cold blood. Nobody who’s sixteen times his age. Yet somehow, swaying to the violins with Simon feels perfectly right.

Last night would have been different. A laughing, rebellious performance, while Cody spent every second alert for danger.

This moment is for them alone.

Three songs later, Simon says, “I think I don’t mind having a babysitter after all.”

If Simon hadn’t said anything, Cody might have been content with the dance. But Simon’s voice is irresistible.

Cody leans away, enough to meet Simon’s gaze. “I want to do something very unprofessional right now.”

“You terrible brute,” Simon murmurs. His eyes are blue-green, but just as hungry as the night before.

Cody touches Simon’s cheek and bends down to kiss him. The world rocks, and resettles, and suddenly makes sense.

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Chapter 17

Simon

Simon's worries burn away with Cody's touch. The kiss is a relief. A spark. Wonderfully wrong and terribly right. Simon grasps Cody's thin t-shirt, straining the fabric with the force of his grip, and kisses back.

Cody's hands settle at Simon's waist, tugging him closer. Body heat surrounds him, as heady as the memory of blood. The music fades beneath the thud of Cody's heartbeat, so much stronger and faster than Simon's own.

They break apart an eon later. Cody pants for air, while Simon's lungs are still. He takes only enough breath to say, "I'm going to turn off the music."

They need to talk about this. Because as incredible as that kiss was, this isn't how things went last night—when Cody hesitated, then fled. Simon doesn't understand what changed.

Cody steps back, clearly nervous. "Was that okay?"

The symphony cuts off as Simon moves the needle. "It was fine," he says loftily. "I'm sure you'll get better with practice."

"Haha," Cody says, deadpan.

Simon perches on the nearest armchair. He wants to pace around, but his legs feel too weak. The wobbliness echoes his confusion. Would Francisco hate him for this? No. Tania would have scolded him, but Francisco was always so foolishly compassionate. Four and a half centuries, and Simon's never met a werewolf like this before.

He hasn't met many other people like this either.

"Sit," Simon says, expecting Cody to pull up the nearest chair. Or insist on standing for mysterious bodyguard reasons.

Instead, Cody crouches right in front of Simon. Close enough to touch, but leaving space between them. His heartbeat still strikes quickly, and Simon's hand moves without conscious thought. He traces the molten river of Cody's veins, from jaw to collar bone.

"Why didn't you kiss me last night?" Simon asks. There are more important questions, but that's the one that presses most urgently. He had accepted the disappointment. Now he doesn't have to—and he's

lost.

"I should say it's because of my job, but that's not all of it." Cody stares up, intent. "I thought you seemed… drunk on bloodlust. I didn't want to take advantage of you."

Cody sounds sincere, ridiculous as it is.

"Take advantage of me?" Simon chuckles, because that's impossible.

Except the thought settles uncomfortably. He wasn't always ancient and powerful. He was once human, young, and vulnerable. The shadow-gift can't change everything.

"Will you get in trouble for this?" Simon asks, turning to a lighter question.

Cody grins. "Don't worry about me."

"Like I would worry," Simon says, and waits until Cody sighs.

"Normally, Tobias would take me off the job for something like this." Cody's gaze dips to Simon's lips, then his throat. "But these aren't normal circumstances."

"Normally?" Simon asks—feigning offense to mask his genuine jolt of wariness. "Do you often kiss your charges?"

Laughing, Cody straightens up. "I've never even been tempted. You're a bad influence."

That's the right answer. Simon has been part of a pattern before, and it's a trap. Not that this will last. It can't last. But the thought of something new sparks, like his dormant magic awakening.

"You're stuck with me another month," Cody says, stepping back. "The job got extended. Tobias is working on identifying last night's attacker."

First joy—another brief month to uncover whatever *this* is, stirring Simon's cold blood. Then the ache of that old, invisible scar, as the logic unfolds.

Dima hasn't yet texted Simon back. But if he extended the contract with Cody's agency, he isn't in seclusion. He's just ignoring Simon specifically.

"You heard from Dima?" Simon asks, neutrally.

Cody frowns. "Tobias did."

"Fucking typical." Simon leans back in the armchair, deliberately setting aside that silly hurt. He doesn't need to expose that foolishness to Cody. "So, another month for you to paw through my record collection. That's fine with me."

Nervousness crosses Cody's face, quickly scowled away. He's preoccupied with something completely separate from Simon's sire

issues. “There’s one problem. That includes the full moon, and I… I can’t control the shift during those nights.” Cody’s grin can’t paper over the obvious shame. “Tobias will come over to back me up, if that’s okay with you. We’ll need a room to lock me in for at least two nights.”

“Can’t control,” Simon repeats. Caution is welcome after the spark of unfamiliar emotions. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t have a pack to ground me.” Cody shrugs, helpless. “Sometimes I struggle not to shift when my emotions are high. Around the full moon, I can’t stop it at all. Sometimes I lose time. I haven’t hurt anyone,” he adds quickly, though without enthusiasm. “But I have to be careful.”

Simon regards him thoughtfully. Cody looks meeker and more restrained now than ever, when he’s confessing his dangerous lack of control.

“That first night, your claws came out. Last night, your jaw changed.” Simon tilts his head. “I thought that was just a normal werewolf thing.”

Cody winces. “No, that’s me having wolf management issues.”

How peculiar. Simon usually has an excellent sense of danger—and he hasn’t been scared of Cody since the first night. Cody’s confession doesn’t match his behavior.

But Simon isn’t stupid enough to dismiss the threat of a rabid werewolf, from that werewolf’s own mouth.

“Do you trust Tobias?” Simon asks.

Cody seems startled by the question. “Yes.”

“Then make the arrangements.” Simon rises to his feet, no longer feeling shaky. “There are a couple of rooms that might work as kennels.”

“Great. I’ll let him know.” Cody still looks hesitant. Like a puppy in an unfamiliar space. “What are your plans for the day? I mean, the night?”

Simon is tempted to drag Cody into another dance. Song after song, until they’re both exhausted, and Simon doesn’t have to think anymore. But thinking is unfortunately necessary, to process that dance, that kiss, that confession—oh, right. And the conspiracy against his undead life.

“I need to look up the names from Kimiko’s guest book,” Simon says. “It would go faster if you split the list with me.”

Cody must recognize the olive branch. His shoulders settle for the first time since mentioning his control issues. “Gladly.”

Simon smiles, heading for the door. “I’ll grab a laptop from

downstairs. Meet me in the kitchen?"

"Will do," Cody says, following. His presence is warm behind Simon until they part ways. Cody to his guest room, and Simon to his private chambers.

Letting people close is terrible. Trusting people is even worse. Part of Simon wants to trust Cody anyway, at least enough to give him a chance.

Simon still loads his gun with silver before returning upstairs. Just to be safe.

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Chapter 18

Cody

Cody's senses hum as he paces the driveway. The rhythmic crunch of gravel blends with the surrounding forest sounds. Each individual ray of sunlight seems to tickle his skin.

Soon, the sunlight will fade, and the moon will take its throne.

One night before the full moon. One complete cycle since Cody's disastrous last job. He can't fuck this up—but anxiety won't exactly help him control his wolf. All of his lapses have been caused by strong emotion or sudden danger. If Cody can keep his shit together, he might not even shift.

Key word: if.

"We have a plan," Cody mutters to himself. "Everything will be fine."

The containment room—or the kennel, as Simon calls it—is ready. Tobias is due at the house in a few minutes, which is why Cody is awake this early. He's gotten used to the nocturnal lifestyle.

He's gotten used to living with Simon, too.

They've settled into a pattern of not kissing. Not talking about it. Just existing in each other's presence, observing each other's instinctive behaviors. Cody doesn't mind the scent of bottled blood on Simon's lips. When they watch TV and the doorbell rings on the show, Simon laughs at Cody's bristling fur.

Living in limbo isn't frustrating like Cody would have expected. It's satisfying, basking in the potential. Like the moon, ever present as it dances in and out of shadow. They haven't left Simon's property since their trip to the Broken Cross, and they're both safe here.

For once, Cody dreads seeing his closest friend. Tobias's arrival will disrupt that peaceful limbo.

Maybe Cody needs the disruption. Part of him feels guilty—not for lusting over a principal, but for being this happy. For not worrying about what will happen when the job is over and he leaves Simon's side.

The scheduled intruder is driving up to the gate. Tobias had texted

him the model of his rental car in advance, but Cody doesn't relax until he recognizes Tobias in the driver's seat.

Well. As relaxed as he's going to get, with the moon's strengthening pull.

"Hey, man," Cody calls out, as Tobias exits the car. He's rusty with small talk but does his best. "Any trouble on the way out?"

Tobias stretches. He's wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the words *Ask Me About My Pomeranian.* "Smooth flight, once it finally got going." He drags a suitcase out. "Sorry to cut it so close. I should have flown out yesterday—but looks like you haven't wolfed out, so all's well that ends well."

"Don't jinx it," Cody warns.

Tobias's answering laugh is warm, but tired. Cody hasn't seen him this exhausted since college.

"How's Aditi?" Cody asks, feeling guilty. "Sorry for dragging you away for this."

"She's doing great." Adoration softens the dark circles beneath Tobias's eyes. "Her sister's staying over while I'm gone. Last I heard, they're planning on eating pancakes and bacon for every meal."

Cody's unsurprised. "You married a smart one."

"Yes, I did," Tobias says, dreamily. Then he waves his hand, as if breaking his own besotted enthrallment. "How are you? You look…" Tobias peers closer, suspicious. "Why the fuck do you look so happy?"

Cody hadn't realized he looked particularly happy. He's the most stressed he's been in weeks, readying to fight himself against an early shift. Then there's the stress of the job, looking after Simon, monitoring the security system, staying constantly alert.

Except the job isn't stressful when he's doing it right. This is what he thrives on, every neglected pack instinct soothed. Especially when he feels a connection to the person he's protecting. Then it's a purpose, not a job.

"Maybe the fresh air suits me," Cody says instead. "Come on in."

Tobias wags a finger, following Cody through the garage. "You're supposed to say you're happy to see me. But damn, this is a nice piece of land. Are all vampires this rich?"

"They play the long game on real estate." Same as werewolf packs, when there's enough leadership stability over the generations. Werewolves are less likely to sell, though. Territorial.

Getting inside is a slow process. Tobias has to inspect every piece of security equipment he passes. Both to check the installment team did their jobs properly, and to make sure Cody hasn't fucked it up. Tobias does this every time, but he's taking extra long today. Cody

takes a while to realize why, then catches Tobias's furtive glances at the boarded-up windows.

Right. Cody had to get Tobias cleared with the treaty council, so Cody could work for Atwood Security without violating secrecy laws. So, Tobias is allowed to know about werewolves, vampires, witches, and their ilk. But he's spent most of that time only consorting with werewolves. One specific werewolf, that is. Tobias has never been inside a vampire's lair before, and he's politely trying not to gawk.

Cody is hyperaware of the sunset as they drop Tobias's things in a guest room, then proceed to the parlor. He's become as attuned to the sun's movements as he is to the moon. It's twenty minutes past sunset, enough time for someone to crawl from their coffin, when Cody catches Tobias peering at the windows again.

"If you think this is weird, you should see the fridge," Cody says, grinning.

"This isn't weird, this is disappointing!" Tobias complains, with an answering grin. He points at the ceiling. "I wanted bats! Coffins! Horrible velvet wallpaper!"

"Horrible velvet wallpaper is a human invention," Simon says from the doorway.

Tobias jumps but recovers. "We're creative like that." His arm moves like he's about to offer a handshake, then changes his mind.

Some deep, primal part of Cody is happy about that. Nobody else's scent should linger on Simon's skin.

Simon seems amused by Tobias's gawking, but careful inspection reveals his tension. That eternal stillness. Simon has a werewolf-like defensiveness over his territory. Cody hadn't noticed that defensiveness slowly lessening until now, when it returns in full force.

"It's a pleasure to meet you in person," Simon says politely. A far cry from his first meeting with Cody. He's in the same blue sweater he wore the night he tried sneaking out. The one that brings out his eyes.

"Likewise," Tobias says. "You're very…"

Simon leans in the doorway. "Nothing like you expected? Or exactly like?"

Tobias shrugs. "The only other vampire I've met in person is Dima. No offense, but he's creepy as hell."

Simon usually gets distant and sad at that name, but now, he just smiles. "He would be offended if you didn't find him creepy. The moon is getting stronger. Shall we?"

Anxiety flares, awakened from dormancy. Cody is just as aware of sunset as moonrise, but his awareness of Simon eclipses both. He could almost forget the full moon is close, mistaking the buzz in his

veins for attraction.

"If you like your upholstery unscratched," Cody says, pasting cheerfulness over his anxiety.

Simon smiles again instead of biting back. Which means he's uncomfortable or upset. Maybe about having Tobias in his space. Maybe about Cody's werewolf nature, impossible to hide as the moon waxes. Cody can't take the time to figure out what's wrong, and he hates that.

They have to cross the library with the garden mural to reach the chosen containment site. It's usually a storage room. Once Simon heard Cody might scratch up the walls, that eliminated most rooms from consideration.

Cody installed the heavy latch and moved the boxes of books out last week. The current furnishings are sparse—a mattress and a wooden chest with spare clothes. Warm overhead lighting can't soften this into a comfortable den.

"This is rather medieval," Simon remarks.

"And you would know?" Cody asks.

"That's a bit before my time." Simon glances at Tobias, then Cody. "I'll be downstairs," he says, and leaves them at the doorway.

Cody tries not to watch him leave. Better for Simon not to be here, because Cody hates this part. Feeling like an animal being locked up in his cage. The Atwood Security containment room has a nice, self-locking door. Cody doesn't usually have to suffer this indignity in front of other people. But this storage room has to be locked from the outside, with a sturdy metal latch.

The worst part is this is Cody's own damn fault. For not controlling himself. For not finding a new pack or a mate. He can't read Tobias's expression. Pity? Or disgust? Resting tired face?

Tobias says nonchalantly, "If I found out you were fucking a principal, I would have to fire you."

Cody chokes. He'd forgotten how observant Tobias was. "I'm not. Definitely not."

Not yet anyway.

"That's what I like to hear." Tobias gives him a thumbs up. "Now, get in, loser, we're going… wolfing?"

"You're the worst boss," Cody says, and flees into the room. He yanks the door closed on Tobias's laughter—and his own helpless grin.

Fuck. He really lucked into the best college roommate. Sometimes it's easy to remember why he thought friendship and a job would be enough to replace the pack bond.

Unfortunately, his younger self had been wrong. Better put away

his cell phone, just in case. Cody kneels at the wooden chest and flips open the fiddly latch. Opposable thumbs required. He lifts the lid and pauses.

All he'd packed were spare clothes, but now there's also a tablet in a sturdy case and half a dozen books. The assortment is eclectic—mystery, fantasy, self-help, play scripts.

A sticky note on the tablet case reads: *Don't worry about ruining these. They're very cheap, and I'm very wealthy.*

Touching the note, Cody wants to feel warm. Grateful. But the kind gesture perversely makes him lonelier. A door between him and his…

Cody shoves to his feet and keeps moving. Pacing. The gray walls swallow his footsteps.

Simon isn't pack. He's a vampire. Cody's barely known him a month, and that month is barely a blink in Simon's long life. Cody doesn't have a pack, and he's never belonged anywhere since he left for a boy who didn't love him back.

Atwood Security is a career, not a family. Simon Caley is an assignment. As soon as the threat is cleared, Cody will leave.

Or worse, he'll stay.

Until Simon tires of him. Until ancient enmities or petty differences shatter their bond. Until mismatched lifespans wrench them apart. Whether he leaves sooner or later, Cody will be alone. Just like he is right now.

Even underground, in a room without windows, the lonely emptiness inside Cody fills with moonlight.

He staggers, a growl ripping from a changing throat. When his hands hit the ground, they aren't hands anymore. The shift is a full-body blink, and Cody shudders into himself. Claws settle comfortably. His tail sways as he shakes off torn fabric.

He's a wolf. Like he should be.

But he shouldn't be caged, nor wreathed in the scent of cold blood. Alone. Human explanations feel distant, unimportant. Frustration drives Cody forward, shoulder slamming into the horrible door.

Which breaks open. It isn't latched.

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Chapter 19

Simon

A text message buzzes in. Simon's hope is a worn-down habit, already crumbling before he reads the message. Sure enough. Another dead end from the Broken Cross guest book. Simon sends a polite, *Thank you regardless*.

Then he sets his phone aside to continue exploring Cody's room.

There isn't much to see. An array of computer monitors crowds the desk, and luggage huddles in the closet. Dirty clothes pile in a hamper that Simon doesn't remember owning, nor does he remember Cody bringing it in. Otherwise, the off-white walls and simple furnishings are the same as ever.

Except the warm, living scent that clings to every particle of air. Everything else smells sweeter with the blend—mint toothpaste. Gardenia detergent. Cody's scent has settled possessively into the room.

Simon inhales, though he doesn't need the breath. The taste is a strangely soothing luxury.

Werewolves are territorial. Perhaps Cody will be annoyed at Simon poking through his things. Hopefully he is. Annoying Cody is fun. Simon traces the plastic keyboard. Imagining Cody's clenched jaw eases Simon's own disquiet.

Simon is territorial, too, and he dislikes tonight's intruder. Not through any fault of Tobias Atwood's. The man seems polite and competent enough for a human. But he's a stranger in Simon's home. As much as Simon craves companionship, he craves privacy and control, too. His preferred lifestyle does not include an unknown human lounging in one of his libraries.

Even worse, perhaps. Tobias's interruption makes Simon far too aware of how much he likes his current situation.

Cody isn't an intruder anymore. His presence is comfortable, like a too-large sweater, and it happened so fast. A mere month that Simon has tried to stretch longer than the scant mortal heartbeats it spans.

He suspects Cody feels the same. That's why they haven't kissed since that dance in the library. Or even talked about it.

If they kiss again, they might grow closer. If they talk, they might break apart. Simon isn't sure which he fears more. Cody has been so kind. Attentive beyond the obligations of his job. Cody makes Simon's home safer, more personal, than when Simon lives alone.

Cody makes Simon want to paint the gaps in the murals. That was all Simon could think of as he left Cody in the storage room. The empty space in the painted garden.

If Cody were a vampire, Simon would suspect him of scheming for favors, to put Simon in his debt.

But Cody is a werewolf. Which is why he's currently locked in a storage room, and why the gun at Simon's hip carries silver bullets.

Simon is infatuated, he'll admit. But he's not an idiot.

Part of him is reluctant to solve his own attempted assassination. Once the threat is over, Cody will leave. Dima will go silent. Simon will learn who wants him dead—ignorance is bliss, as they say.

Childish reluctance hasn't stopped Simon from reaching out to a few people from Kimiko's guest book, though. Vampires who owe him favors, and who might know something about local hunters or Lawrence Baird.

So far, Simon's questions have only turned up rumors, not answers. Whispers about this guild or that coven scheming to break the treaty. Or a werewolf pack. Or a crew of rogue vampires.

An ocean, Simon decides, as he examines the empty glass on Cody's nightstand. He'll paint a stretch of ocean, dark and moonlit, to fill the gap in the garden mural. It won't fit the rest of the painting, but it doesn't have to. Not everything in life requires a pattern.

Alertness strikes by instinct. Quicker than thought.

Simon is already turning, hand to his gun, when he registers the footsteps and quiet breaths. The steady drum of an approaching heartbeat from a too-large creature.

A wolf emerges from the hallway shadows. It pauses in the doorway, half lit by the bedroom light.

Fire flickers at the edge of Simon's vision. A helpless, reflexive grasping for magic that does nothing, because bottled blood isn't good enough. That's fortunate, because Simon doesn't want to lash out without thinking.

He just didn't expect Cody's wolf form to be enormous.

The wolf's shoulders are the height of Simon's chest. Dark gray fur brushes the doorframe, with pale silver beneath his snout, inside his ears. Gold-orange eyes fix intently on Simon.

"What are you doing here?" Simon asks, striving for calm as his mind races. Where is Tobias? How did Cody get out?

Whys and hows can wait, because Cody is in no shape to answer.

Simon eases the gun from its holster. A slow, natural movement, practice substituting for instinct. He doesn't want to shoot, but he can't tell how aware Cody is right now.

The wolf tenses, ears pinned back at the sight of the gun. So, he understands the threat. Cursing himself for antagonizing the werewolf, Simon aims for a shoulder. He just wants to disable, not—

Cody doesn't lunge forward. He waits, watching. Muscles relax from the near-crouch, and his ears prick forward. This isn't just any werewolf. This is Cody.

They watch each other for two beats of Simon's slow heart, and a hundred of Cody's. Simon's sense of danger ebbs, as if the moon has already pulled away.

"Can you understand me?" Simon asks, and holsters his gun.

Another watchful moment, before Cody moves. His pelt ripples as he passes the doorframe. Then he pauses, as if unsure whether to continue.

"That wasn't a very clear answer." Simon props his hands on his hips, each movement slow and careful. "How about one bark for yes, one bark for no?"

No sound except Cody's breath and pulse. Cody takes another step forward.

Simon marvels to find himself calm. "I could get you one of those button toys. The ones that let cats and dogs talk to their owners. You could press one button for food, and another button for walkies."

Either Cody can't understand him, or he completely lacks a sense of humor in wolf form. Nary a grimace or flick of his ears. But he pads closer, as if Simon's words are permission to approach.

Simon supposes they are. "It's all right whether you understand me or not, as long as you behave."

He reaches out, palm down, fingers relaxed.

Simon has never been this close to a shifted werewolf before, and Cody seems more massive with every step. Yet Simon isn't afraid at all. A memory surfaces, sharp as teeth through flesh. One night, a month after Dima bit him, when the shadow-gift's first thrilling rush had worn off. Simon had woken in his coffin, feral with hunger, suddenly horrified by the fangs in his mouth, the silence of his heart.

Dima had been there that time, to soothe him through it, and Simon had been grateful. Which was probably why Dima helped.

Cody's situation is different. He's been a werewolf all his life, but self-discovery isn't the purview of fledgling vampires alone. Werewolves have the same meager lifespan as humans. It's rare to

truly learn one's nature in so few years.

Hot breath skates over Simon's fingers. Cody smells him gently, then pushes his massive snout into Simon's palm. His nose might have been cold to a human, but it's warm against Simon's undead skin.

"Crazy, out-of-control werewolf," Simon murmurs. "Right."

Cody nuzzles the inside of Simon's wrist, pushing back the sweater sleeve. The gesture is intimate and strange. Like Cody is getting to know Simon in an entirely new way.

Simon inhales, another little luxury, and feels drunk on the wilderness.

Then his phone buzzes.

Cody flinches, ears pinned. Repressing his own startled reaction, Simon grabs his cell. "Don't move. Despite what Kimiko says, phone calls aren't scary."

The screen shows a recently added contact—Tobias Atwood. Simon answers. "About time."

Tobias's voice is urgent. "Stay wherever you are and close the door. Cody got out, and I need to track him down." His words echo, audible both directly and over the phone. Tobias is nearby.

"I'm aware," Simon says, relieved Tobias is all right even as he resents the interruption. "We're both in Cody's guest room, and everything's—"

A curse on the other end, and footsteps slap rapid-fire up the hall.

"—fine," Simon concludes, as Tobias skids into the doorway.

Cody's shoulders rise, bristling. Simon hangs up the call.

"My apologies, Mr. Caley," Tobias pants, eyes darting wildly between vampire and werewolf. A gun gleams in his hand. "I'll get my employee out of your hair. Cody, get your furry ass over here!"

Simon's shoulders loosen. Some humans get confused, but Tobias still addresses Cody as a person, not an animal.

Then Simon tenses again at Cody's snarl.

"Shit," Tobias mutters. He looks frazzled and exhausted, but his voice turns calm. "Come on, Cody, same protocol as usual. Don't bother the client."

Cody moves between them, caging Simon beside the bed. Close enough that Simon would have to squeeze past his shoulder to leave the bedroom.

"We might need a change in protocol," Simon says, moving slowly. No surprises, just a tentative scritch behind Cody's ear. A firmer scritch, when Cody's bristling fur settles.

"Be careful," Tobias warns.

Simon continues rubbing behind Cody's ear, fingers lost in the thick pelt. "Has Cody ever hurt a principal? Or anyone?"

"Never," Tobias answers. "But he always warns me not to let my guard down. If he can't control the shift, he can't control himself. That's what he says, anyway. Fuck."

"Maybe he doesn't need to control himself," Simon muses. "What happened tonight?"

Tobias winces. "I take full responsibility for this incident, Mr. Caley. I fell asleep."

Of course. Those shadowed eyes. A delayed flight. Mentions of a pregnant wife at home. Simon's lips twist in amusement. A poisoned vampire, an out-of-control werewolf, and a sleep-deprived human. There isn't a stable person in the house.

Though Simon feels more stable with Cody edging closer, fur brushing Simon's jeans. His body heat radiates like a furnace, and Simon is certain of one thing. Cody doesn't like intruders any more than Simon does.

"No harm done, as long as you stop calling me Mr. Caley." Simon's smile deepens as Tobias stares like he's gone mad. Maybe he has. "Now, take a deep breath—humans still do that, right?"

All right, that was unfair. Little vampire jokes tend to freak humans out.

Simon stops smiling, because smiling seems to be scary. And the more nervous Tobias gets, the more Cody's fur bristles. "I'll take over dog-sitting duties," Simon continues. "You should sleep, or pace around the house or something. Probably sleep."

"Mr.—" Tobias catches himself. "I can't do that. Speaking as a professional, and as Cody's friend."

Heartwarming. Inconvenient. "I appreciate that," Simon says politely. One of those magic phrases he's used countless times over the centuries. Then his voice hardens into his best impression of Dima. "But I have this under control. You should leave."

Simon has never had Dima's talent for enthrallment, but he can be intimidating when he needs to be. A cold predator plucking the fight-or-flight strings of human hearts.

Tobias flinches, then holsters his gun. "Cody was right. This is a hell of a job." He hesitates, scowling through his internal conflict, then leaves.

As his footsteps fade, Cody's fur smoothes into place. All according to plan—Simon is once again alone with a werewolf, in a room more claustrophobic by the moment. A sensation Simon hadn't known he could still feel, given how comfortable his coffin has become.

But even if Simon isn't in danger right now, Cody takes up so much space.

"Great plan," Simon mutters to himself, then raises a cheerful voice. "All right, good boy, let me past so I can—"

Cody spins, broad forehead meeting Simon's torso. One firm nudge sends Simon stumbling backwards.

Terrible plan. Alarm pulses belatedly through Simon's mind, as his legs hit the edge of the bed. The next nudge knocks him onto his ass. He shouldn't have confidently sent Tobias away. What if Cody *is* out of control, and fuck all Simon's musings about mortal lifespans and knowing oneself?

Is this what Francisco saw before he—

There are no gnashing teeth, no rending claws. The massive beast sits down slowly. Even more slowly, his head rests on Simon's thighs.

Simon stares, stunned. As the warm weight settles on his knees, the closeness doesn't feel claustrophobic anymore.

"I wasn't going anywhere," Simon says, with a flicker of excitement he would have called breathlessness long ago. "I was going to close the door."

Cody's head gets heavier. Each hot breath tickles Simon's nerves.

"Yes, now I'm really not going anywhere. Good job."

Simon gently touches Cody's ears again. Silky fur slides between his fingers. Would Cody permit this in his human shape? Would Simon want to reach out? A moment like this would break their impasse. Neither too close nor too far, never speaking, never acting. Because you can't destroy a portrait you've never painted.

Perhaps this is too much already. Cody's still the same person, just wolf-shaped and moon-drunk. A little less polite in his overprotectiveness.

Simon doesn't mind that as much as he should. He likes the thought of someone returning to him. Someone staying with him. The only thing that's missing is conversation. If they were mates, they could speak like this. The thought isn't as horrifying as Simon expects.

Then Cody flinches beneath Simon's palm—and begins to change.

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Chapter 20

Cody

All the worries of Cody's other aspect feel distant now, kept at bay by soothing fingers behind his ear. Cody remembers those worries. They're just irrelevant. Stupid. Don't shift. Don't wander. Don't hurt—but why would he hurt—

Simon.

The moon's claws loosen.

Cody scrabbles away from those gentle fingers. Carpet snags as his bones convulse. Flesh and sinew snaps from one familiar shape to another, and veins map the contours of his other body. His sense of smell dulls as his thoughts clear.

The transformation is a gasp for breath. He hunches over, naked, hands and knees digging into the carpet, as his fears flood back.

Simon shouldn't be here. Cody should be locked away. Not in this room, with Simon watching cool-eyed from the bed.

"That was very weird to watch up close," Simon says, light amusement balancing over an emotion Cody can't read.

Cody staggers to his feet. One step closer, his first instinct to assess and protect, before jerking himself back. "Fuck, Simon, I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Simon tilts his head. He appears unharmed. "You don't remember?"

Cody cringes. There's no smell of blood. Not fresh, anyway, just traces of that bottled stuff lingering in Simon's cold scent. Cody's clear-headed enough to tell the difference.

"What a pity," Simon says airily. "I'll catch you up. I taught you to 'sit' and 'shake.' We were about to work on 'roll over' and 'fetch' when you shifted back."

"This isn't funny," Cody snaps, then winces at the snarl in his own voice.

Simon's smirk softens—which only makes Cody feel worse. "You didn't hurt anyone."

Fuck. Simon shouldn't be comforting Cody. Simon definitely

shouldn't have to remind him that there's one other person in the house.

"Where's Tobias?" Cody asks, guilt sharpening with every breath. "What happened?"

"Tobias fell asleep without locking you up properly. Human fragility, you know how it is." Simon shrugs. "He's fine. I sent him off for a nap, because it seemed like you only wanted to hang out with… me."

Eye contact wavers.

That's one thing Cody remembers from the shift. More than a thought, more than an emotion. An overpowering need to find Simon. To guard him. To breathe him in.

Rationally speaking, that's the last thing Cody should have wanted. Simon is wearing a lighthearted mask now, damned centuries of smug superiority, but he's scared of werewolves, for good reason. Cody should be controlling himself.

Instead, he proved that Simon was right to be scared. Weeks of fantasizing torn apart in the moonlight.

"I could have hurt you," Cody says, rough and quiet.

"You could have," Simon allows, then taps the holster at his hip. "If my aim was off. Luckily, all you did was shed on me."

The movement and words draw Cody's gaze to Simon's lap, where he hazily recalls resting his head. An intimate, comfortable memory.

Which reminds Cody that he's naked. Bare skin prickles beneath Simon's polite—but unaverted—gaze.

"I'm going to put on pants," Cody says, so steadfast in his guilt that embarrassment is only a distant whisper. "Then I'll find Tobias and tender my resignation."

He moves towards the closet, every sense hyperaware of Simon moving towards the door. Near-silent footfalls echo like thunder in Cody's ears. That's it, Cody supposes. Nothing more to say.

Simon closes the door firmly—with himself still inside, planted in Cody's way. "You'll do no such thing. Tobias needs his beauty sleep, and we need to talk."

"Nothing to talk about." Cody drags his sweatpants over his hips. "I put you in danger. That's unacceptable, especially with your history."

His pack—his family—was fucking right. He can't live with outsiders. Humans, vampires, anyone. He doesn't belong here. Never should have let himself pretend.

With a twist of cold air, Simon is in his space. Fingertips at Cody's jaw, then behind his ear, holding him in place by his hair. "Listen to

me, you fucking dog." Simon's words wrench Cody from his self-indulgent panic. "I'm weak, not helpless. I'm not a besotted fledgling. If I decide you're a threat, or I want you out of my house, I will say that. With words. God help you if you disobey me then." His grip tightens, and he shakes a bit—though it hardly moves Cody's head. "Until then, don't infantilize me as part of your angst. You fucking idiot."

Stunned, Cody stares into Simon's fierce eyes. That ashen face has never looked more alive.

"I apologize for being concerned about your safety," Cody says, when his brain is functioning again.

Simon's grip softens, more like petting, and the shift memory reels through Cody. How peaceful and right he felt with Simon's fingers in his fur.

That rightness lingers as Simon steps back.

"Could you understand me while you were in wolf shape?" Simon asks.

"I could in a regular shift." Cody resists the urge to touch his hair where Simon's hand had been. He should be apologetic. Professional. Not fantasizing about the memory. "I can't understand as well during a forced shift like that, when my wolf takes over. I get tone of voice. Impressions. No specific meaning."

Simon nods thoughtfully. "Interesting. What made you shift back?"

"I don't know." Cody feels awkward, like his body hasn't resettled yet. Except talking to Simon is helping. "Usually, I shift back at dawn. After I've torn up the safe room. This isn't how it usually goes. I get… violent."

"Only in the safe room?" Simon asks pointedly.

Cody tenses.

"Only when you're locked up?" Simon presses.

"It's not that simple." Cody could use a shirt right now. Shoes. He's too exposed. Years of half-measures taping over the problems. "Any strong negative emotion or sense of danger could trigger violence, too. The safe room isn't a long-term solution. My wolf hates feeling trapped. But that's better than hurting someone, especially when I'm working with humans."

Simon's focus would be exhilarating in any other circumstance. Maybe it still is. "You shifted back early tonight. It's barely midnight."

"I feel safe with you," Cody says, before he can stop himself.

It's the right thing to say. An offer of yet more vulnerability that makes him feel stronger than before. It's so true it stings them both, by the way Simon's lips part. The tiny breath that exhales in a quiet,

“Oh.”

More than safe, Cody’s wolf sings from the moon’s shadow. Simon feels like pack. Especially now, the way he’s bundled up in Cody’s scent, safely ensconced in Cody’s bedroom. Right where Cody wants him. Right where Cody found him when his wolf went searching.

Wait a second.

Cody jerks out of contemplating Simon’s lips. “I came to find you after I broke out.”

“I’m irresistible,” Simon says, smirking.

“So why were you in my room?”

Simon’s sudden shifty gaze is adorable. A centuries-old vampire caught out. “I wanted to spy on you.”

The lie is even more delightful. It tugs on instincts even more vital than the moon’s call. Something shared and ancient that burns away Cody’s guilt.

“I don’t believe you,” Cody says, reaching out.

He gets his answer when Simon allows the touch on his cold neck. Even before Simon confesses, “Maybe I feel safe with you, too.” Simon traces a chill down Cody’s bare stomach. His touch is no longer soothing. It ignites. “And maybe you shouldn’t have put these sweatpants on.”

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Chapter 21

Simon

This time, Simon pushes Cody to the bed. The mattress protests as Cody sits back, but Simon has no complaints about being yanked closer. Bending down, he surrenders into a kiss.

Cody's lips are an anchor. Simon has never craved someone like this before. No human meal, no fellow vampire, not even Dima. It seems at once impossible and inevitable that Cody would crave him too.

"Sit," Simon murmurs against Cody's lips.

A laugh rumbles between them. "You little bastard."

"Good boy." Another shallow kiss. "Stay." Simon pulls away just enough to unfasten his holster.

Setting the weapon on the nightstand feels natural. He doesn't need it. Cody's touch is hot enough to burn away any fear of moonlight. In a fluid motion, Simon swings a leg over Cody, straddling his lap to more deeply kiss him.

Cody moves with him, stroking Simon's back, pulling him closer. His eyes are so dark and fierce, it hurts to look at them. Kissing is easier.

Simon is hyperaware of the sweater between his back and Cody's hands. The faint whisper of friction. He's even more aware that nothing separates his hands from Cody's chest. Typical werewolf brute, taut muscle covered in thick hair. Curls trail in a thin line to his waistband, where his tan continues. Simon can't even remember what sunlight feels like.

Maybe something like this. Simon takes in enough air to tease, "Is this the moon's influence too? Your animal instincts?"

Cody exhales, like steam against Simon's throat. "Every instinct."

Whatever this is, Simon wants all of it. They surge into another kiss, and the room thunders with Cody's heartbeat.

Simon's blood, taken from others and transmuted by the shadow-gift, runs slow. He hardens gradually until the pressure of denim becomes nearly unbearable. His body can wait, though, while mind

and heart sink into the soft movements of Cody's lips. While rough hands slide beneath his sweater to hold him steady.

Simon is ancient. Patient.

Cody isn't.

With a low growl, Cody flips Simon back onto the bed. Cold air separates them for an agonizing instant until Cody leans over. He braces, hands splayed on either side of Simon's head.

Tonight, Cody is stronger. Simon's strength and magic are still shackled by poison, and Cody's body hums with animal force. All that power barely contained, focused entirely on him. Simon was taught to be wary of creatures stronger than himself. Security comes from overpowering any threat or hiding. Trading favors. Trust was never an option.

But Cody's strength and focus are too exhilarating to hide from.

"Simon, I think…" Cody's expression twists, feral, with some internal conflict.

Simon traces Cody's bare arms, from biceps to shoulder. "What do you think? Or—" He hooks one leg around Cody to yank him closer. "—we could stop thinking. Just for tonight."

Cody jerks, rutting their cocks together in a blaze of heat. The look on his face is better than Simon's own pleasure. "Okay. If you want."

"What do *you* want?" Simon asks, smirking.

It's not a fair question. Not when Simon's stretching his arms over his head, spreading himself out beneath Cody's gaze.

Cody's laugh is more like a snarl. Pinning Simon by the wrists, Cody leans close. "I want to fuck you so hard, you smell like me for a week."

Simon shivers at the brush of lips against his ear. "Just a week?" He arches against Cody's firm body. "Show me what you've got."

Cody sits up in a ripple of abdominal muscles. Simon half-expects some sort of sardonic comment. Like what you see? He would have been forced to answer yes.

"Take your sweater off so I don't ruin it," Cody says, clearly controlling himself. "It probably costs a thousand dollars or something. Vintage. Antique."

"About twenty bucks." Simon twists obligingly and tosses the sweater across the room. "I got it on clearance. These jeans, on the other hand…"

He doesn't remember buying the jeans. All that matters is getting them off. Which he's about to do when Cody pushes him back down. Very pushy. Simon likes that, particularly when Cody reaches for his fly.

Okay, yes. That's better than taking them off himself.

Cody slips the button open and tugs the zipper, his knuckles brushing the hard line of Simon's cock. The touch is electric, rocking through Simon's body. He hears a groan, not his, and looks into Cody's face.

He's nearly undone by what he finds there: an expression of incandescent wonder. Raw, stripped down, ravenous enough to consume them both.

Simon wants desperately to know what that might entail.

Cody cups Simon through the denim. "I assume you're not a virgin."

"No, but it's been about a decade, and I'm tired of waiting." Simon bucks into the firm touch. "Get on with it."

Rolling his eyes, Cody obeys the demand. After some awkward wiggling—immortality and supernatural reflexes can't fix everything—jeans and underwear sail across the room to join the sweater. Cody slides from the bed to shuck off his sweatpants.

Simon leans back, one leg propped up, ignoring his own needy cock in favor of admiring the view. Cody's turned away, so Simon is free to observe without being seen. Yet he knows Cody is aware of him. Listening, scenting.

Every muscle and sinew moves in harmony, elevating to an art the act of rummaging in a drawer. Cody returns to bed with a plastic bottle in hand. Simon is more interested in Cody's body, now fully exposed.

Simon had seen him briefly after the shift, of course. Too briefly. The mood wasn't right. Now the mood is perfect, and Simon wants to savor every detail. Particularly Cody's cock, jutting red from the nest of dark curls. Imagining that thick length spearing him has Simon nearly salivating with need.

The mattress dips, and Simon's world tilts too, as Cody kneels between his legs. Callused fingers stroke the underside of Simon's thigh.

"Do you want to top?" Cody asks.

"I want you in me," Simon demands, and answering hunger flares in Cody's eyes.

This is insane. Simon knows this, a fact both learned and inherited, as he drags Cody into another blazing kiss. As a bottle cap clicks, and wet fingers map an eager path beneath his thigh. He's about to fuck a werewolf. A werewolf he only met a month ago. It's been so long since he allowed himself to get close to anyone.

Nobody else matters as slick fingers rub over his hole, a shock of

heat. Simon moans into Cody's mouth. Manages a sound more whining encouragement than actual words.

Cody's first finger pushes in easily. It's been a decade, but Simon's body opens like he was made to take Cody in. His own hands wander, tangling in Cody's hair, gliding over firm shoulders and arms. His nails dig into Cody's back, not quite deep enough to tear flesh.

Is the chill of his body unpleasant?

Simon's fingers flex, making Cody groan and rut forward. His cock slides hot against Simon's thigh. Not unpleasant at all, then.

"Come on," Simon grits out as another thick finger pushes in. Warmth seeps into him with every stretch, and the heel of Cody's hand rolls over his balls. That's great—fantastic—but Simon needs more. "Give it to me, wolf."

With a savage grin, Cody slows to a leisurely, messy pace. "You know, I'm kind of liking the bratty thing."

Then he hooks up, directly into Simon's prostate. Simon whines, arching off the bed. "You fucking tease."

"Yes," Cody purrs into Simon's neck. "Like that, you beautiful brat."

Simon should be offended. At a mere twenty-eight years old, Cody doesn't know anything about anything. But Simon can't bring himself to care. Every deep stroke sends him writhing, cock straining. He jerks upwards, seeking friction, but finds only heated air.

Fingers slip away with a filthy sound. When Cody repositions, Simon moves in perfect concert with him. Their bodies align, Cody's blunt cockhead nudging Simon's entrance.

With one long shove, they're together.

When Simon first turned, the night was an awakening. The world brightened and darkened, sharpened and softened, every element intensified. Simon felt every faint promise of pleasure and pain. Everything ordinary became new, and Simon reveled in it.

The spark faded over the centuries. Age and loneliness dulled his senses. Now, Cody's touch makes him feel like a fledgling again.

Only this time, the architect of Simon's transformation is just as overcome. Cody fucks with unrelenting force, eyes wild but each thrust slow and deep. Pleasure crashes through Simon, and his mouth waters. His teeth ache.

"Your eyes are red," Cody says. Fascinated. Not alarmed. Not stopping.

Thank fuck. Simon rocks into each thrust, his bloodthirst transfigured into something even more primal. "You smell delicious," he manages on shallow breaths. "Don't worry. I won't mar your virgin

throat."

"What a coincidence," Cody says, just as breathless. "You smell delicious, too." He adjusts, forcing the angle slightly off, slightly painful. Just one thrust, but Cody must see how Simon's whole body sings in response. Because he repeats that every few thrusts.

Each fleeting hurt binds Simon to the present moment. He needs Cody so deep inside him that no part remains untouched. Physically and mentally. Cody's concentration is absolute. Simon feels it in the precise force of each movement. The tension of Cody's broad shoulders. Clenched jaw and closed eyes, before Cody drops his forehead to Simon's collarbone.

Cody hooks one hand under Simon's thigh, and Simon bends nearly in half with the push. Deeper. Better. Exactly what he needs, even before Cody's other hand drops to Simon's aching cock.

One rapturous touch, and Simon falls silent, rigid, blinded with pleasure. Like staring into the sun after centuries of night. His release spills over Cody's hand.

With a final, brutal thrust, Cody shudders to join him. Hot come paints Simon's insides, almost too much for overstimulated nerves. Lost in the sound of Cody's harsh breath, Simon falls back onto the mattress. His fingers loosen with difficulty from Cody's biceps.

They're still joined when Cody collapses on top of him, all scratching hair and sweat-slick skin. Cody mumbles, "You're incredible."

Simon isn't sure if he's supposed to have heard that, so he decides not to answer. To be polite. Not because he's too dazed to formulate a response. Better to close his eyes and relish the calm. He deserves this respite.

He wouldn't mind having this forever. That isn't impossible—but Simon shies away from all the questions and decisions that would entail. Now isn't the time to think about the future.

Eventually, Cody pushes up with a grunt. His softened cock slips away, and his hand lingers, tentative, on Simon's hip. Cody lies beside Simon, still surrounding him with sweat and heat.

Simon rolls over and touches Cody's throat. Blood pulses temptingly beneath his fingertips. Pulses even faster as Simon leans in for a wet, lazy kiss.

"Don't say anything," Simon whispers.

Cody obeys his plea by silently pulling him close. Perfect. Simon doesn't want to speak or listen or even think. He just wants to curl up —like this—under Cody's strong arm, pillowing his head over that thundering heartbeat.

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Chapter 22

Cody

Cody adores the chill of Simon's body. A month ago, he would have scoffed at the thought. But now, everything about Simon is perfect. His eyes shifting between blue-green and red as Cody drove him wild. His taunting words. His death-cold flesh tempering the heat of Cody's desire. A soothing balm during a fever dream.

Fine hair tickles Cody's chest. No breath, because Simon only breathes when he wants to speak. His weight fits perfectly beneath Cody's arm.

Or the other way around. Simon is immortal. Cody's the one who gladly fits around him. Like Simon is a second moon reshaping Cody's soul.

The real moon still hums at the back of his mind. It isn't urgent, and Cody is settled in this shape for now. Not because his emotions are steady—anything but. It's because he's somewhere he belongs. Anchored to someone who could belong to him in turn.

Which is ridiculous to spring on someone after one night together. Another werewolf would understand, but Cody should probably slow this down.

Tracing the contours of Simon's ribs, Cody starts, "I was wondering—"

Simon props himself up to glare. "I said not to say anything."

"—what's immortality like?" Cody continues, steadfast.

Simon's glare melts into surprise, then wariness. Either he's more expressive than usual, or Cody's just hyper-attuned to him. "Why do you ask?"

"I want to know everything about you," Cody says. "But that's coming on a little strong, so I thought maybe one question at a time."

Simon settles back down. Not quite as melted and comfortable as before, but he hasn't fled. "Everyone handles it differently. Sometimes it's hard, watching people die, or leave, or change. But there are moments… There are moments I never would have reached in a normal lifespan. Those moments are worth everything."

Cody exhales into Simon's hair. He used to think about vampires as creatures of the past. But Simon speaks of the future. The gaps not yet painted on the walls.

What will Simon be like in another fifty years? In five hundred? Immortality never sounded appealing until now.

Perhaps Cody's question was a mistake. Simon lost a brother to another werewolf's greed. He would never bare his throat for a claiming bite.

But there are options in between nothing and forever.

"After this job, I'm going to take some time off," Cody says. "I'd love to take you out for a drink or something."

Cold fingertips alight on Cody's throat.

"A drink?" Simon asks.

Cody swallows beneath the touch. "Not like that." Even if Cody's starting to wonder what a vampire bite would really feel like. What do the eager human victims at the Broken Cross know that Cody refuses to see? "Would you hate seeing me again?"

Simon slides to the edge of the bed. "I might actually enjoy it." His confession sounds easy, though knowing him, it isn't. He doesn't look back over his shoulder, but he must sense Cody's grin, because he adds, "Don't get full of yourself."

Too late. Cody stretches out, settling his hands behind his head, luxuriating in the permission behind the understatement. "I would never. Are you leaving?"

Still avoiding eye contact, Simon bends to collect his clothes and handgun. "Sunrise is soon. I should go downstairs."

Sunrise is hours away, but Cody doesn't call out the lie. The desire to retreat means Simon felt something tonight. Maybe even as intense as what Cody felt.

"See you at sunset, then?" Cody says, reaching for his sweatpants. He hesitates before putting them on. He should shower.

Simon pauses at the door. "Unless the moon will trouble you again tonight."

The question startles Cody. He keeps forgetting it's the night before the full moon, because he feels so settled in himself. Then there's the sweetness of Simon's consideration.

"No more trouble tonight," Cody says softly. "Thank you."

"That's good." Simon lingers in the doorway for the length of one undead heartbeat. Then he slips away into the hall.

Cody waits until Simon's footsteps fall silent before dragging himself to shower. Thankfully, soap and water can't scrub Simon's

scent from his skin.

***

No more trouble, Cody had promised. That might change now, when he finds Tobias in the kitchen.

Tobias cradles a mug of coffee. By the haggard twitch of his eyes, it isn't his first. He takes another gulp, then sets the mug down hard. "There's blood in the fridge."

"I warned you it was weird." Cody sits across the table. "You should be asleep."

"I'm the boss. You don't get to tell the boss to go to sleep." Tobias rubs his eyes. "Fuck. I'm sorry I messed up. This wasn't the plan."

Tobias's sense of responsibility is one of the reasons Cody likes working for him so much. Tobias holds Cody accountable, and he holds himself to the same standards on the rare occasions he fucks up. Even when he's tangled up in a paranormal job he just isn't equipped for.

"It turned out okay." Cody hopes nothing in his expression gives away how much better than okay it turned out. "Simon's safe downstairs again, you just need a nap, and I didn't scratch up the furniture. Pretty good outcome."

"I need a better report than 'all's well that ends well,' Weston," Tobias says sternly. "Why was tonight different?"

Because Simon feels safe. Comfortable. Pack. Because Cody's wolf hates being trapped. Because—

"I like Simon," Cody says, because there's no other explanation. He's going to have to tell Tobias sooner or later.

And he just can't hide his wide, sappy grin anymore.

Tobias stares. Then slumps, head in hands. "For fuck's sake. We have policies, you asshole."

"You could put me on probation after this job," Cody suggests helpfully.

"I'm too tired for this shit." Tobias straightens up, finally looking more alive than exhausted. "I was wondering why you looked so fucking smug. Don't tell me anything else—I'm going the fuck to bed."

Which is when Cody knows they'll be okay. If Tobias was going to fire him, he would do it right now. Anything that could wait was something they could sort out. That's good. Cody's done shoving himself into the cage of professionalism, and this whole situation isn't a job anymore.

He isn't protecting Simon for the paycheck.

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Chapter 23

Simon

Simon toys with a glass of blood. He's using one of the fancy crystal goblets, just to give Tobias a show. Sitting cross-legged on the porch probably ruins the effect, alas.

The stars are sharp this far out of the city, and the air is silver with moonlight. There's a brief window of time between Simon waking and the full moon taking hold of Cody. Apparently, Cody intends to use that time to be difficult.

"I should just stay in the safe room," Cody says, pacing the porch. "Last night worked out, but tonight could be different."

'Worked out' is quite the understatement. Simon takes another sip of blood. "You said being outside would help."

Tobias stands alert next to Simon. Tonight's t-shirt says *My Other Kid Is a Pomeranian*, and he seems better rested. Simon still resents the intrusion, but Tobias's flight out is scheduled for the morning. He'll be tolerable until then. Most importantly, he agrees with Simon.

"I've never liked locking you up like a rabid dog," Tobias says. "We're not downtown tonight. This is a good time to test it."

"What if someone is camping out there?" Cody gestures towards the blurred darkness of the woods. "What if I get past the fence?"

"I'm a reclusive vampire," Simon says. "My estate is remote on purpose. If anyone is nearby, they deserve to get eaten."

Tobias chuckles, then cuts off. "Wait, that was a joke, right?"

"Of course," Simon says sweetly, and sips his blood. "Seriously, there shouldn't be anyone out here."

"Except for you two," Cody points out.

Nobody responds. Bringing up the silver loaded into their guns seems gauche.

Cody sighs. Moonlight washes the shadows from his face. After a moment of complete stillness, he says, "Fine," and crouches to unlace his shoes.

Tobias averts his eyes as Cody undresses.

Simon doesn't.

The view is even better than last night. Glinting stars and lush forest bring Cody's form into primal balance. Every muscle moves with ease. Even at a distance, beneath unbroken skin, Cody's blood smells richer than the bottled stuff in Simon's goblet.

This is the right decision. Locking a werewolf up on the full moon is like locking a ravenous fledgling in their coffin. Safer for the night, perhaps. But far more dangerous in the long term.

Cody piles his clothes on the porch step, then meets Simon's eyes. He takes one step forward, like he wants to duck down for a kiss. Which Simon would welcome, both for the pleasure of kissing and the amusement of having an audience.

But discretion wins out—or the brightening moon. Cody turns from the porch, heedless of the gravel beneath his bare feet, and transforms.

The changes are quick enough to blur in mortal eyes. Simon winces at the convulsion of flesh and bone. Better than Tania turning into a swarm of bats, at least. The next moment, Cody stands on all fours, shoulders heaving with the effort, tail swaying slowly.

Bright canine eyes gleam in the porch light, like lanterns against his fur. Cody shakes himself, then throws back his head.

The howl trembles through the night. Pure and resonant enough to send chills down Simon's already cold spine. Tobias swears under his breath.

Cody looks at them one more time. Then he trots away, nose lowered to the lawn.

"I'd prefer you hung out inside," Tobias says. "For security reasons."

Right. Besides this whole werewolf rehabilitation thing, someone's still trying to kill Simon. Arguing wouldn't be nice, especially after Simon so sharply dismissed Tobias last night.

Do the kids still call it sexiling?

Simon rises to his feet. One smooth motion that doesn't spill a drop of blood. "Cody showed me how the cameras work. I'll spy from inside."

"One more thing." Tobias grimaces, glancing out to Cody, who's currently inspecting the garage with his tail held high. A fascinating hesitation wars across Tobias's face. "If my employee ever behaves in a manner that concerns you, please inform me immediately."

Ah. Poor man. Looks like someone had an awkward conversation recently.

"I appreciate your professionalism," Simon says, raising his goblet of blood in toast. "Goodbye, if I don't see you before you leave."

Tobias bravely doesn't flinch.

In the kitchen, Simon forces himself to finish drinking before washing the glass. Disrespectful to waste blood freely given, even if it isn't fresh from the vein. He considers retreating downstairs or pretending to paint. Ordinary hobbies for what feels—beyond all reason—like an ordinary night.

He fucked a werewolf.

That werewolf wants to take him on a date sometime.

And Simon's world hasn't crumbled into pieces. Sun and moon and earth keep dancing around each other. If anything, the stars shine a little brighter.

A date would be nice.

Smiling to himself, because nobody can see him acting like a smitten teenager, Simon makes his way to Cody's room. He can spy on the camera network from there.

***

Tonight goes differently. Quiet, comfortable. No better or worse than raw passion—just different. Simon is in the garden mural library when Cody finds him. Dawn lurks less than an hour beneath the horizon, and Cody's still in wolf shape.

He rests his head in Simon's lap again. Simon strokes his ruff for as many minutes as he dares, waiting for Cody to change back. But the moon is stronger this time. Cody won't change shape until Simon is already asleep.

Tomorrow night will be good. Next time Simon wakes, Tobias will be gone, and Cody will be human-shaped. They can readjust to their habits or create new ones. Maybe solve an assassination attempt. Maybe dance again.

"Good morning," Simon murmurs, with one last ruffle of Cody's neck. "Sweet dreams."

Cody sighs, tail thumping, then lets Simon go.

Simon flees as quickly as he can to avoid the temptation of lingering. Moments later, alone in his coffin, his fingertips are still warm.

***

A cell phone chime punctuates Simon's lazy waking. Then another. The second is unusual. The third is alarming. Scrabbling for his phone, Simon sits up—he's been sleeping with the coffin open since the poisoning.

Message notifications fill his lock screen, from Kimiko and other

vampires Simon's been contacting recently.

Kimiko: Hey, so there's a problem.

Wilhelm: You asked about incidents in the area. Funny thing, that.

Becky: Good 3v3ning! OMG you will NOT b3li3v3 what I just h3ard!

As Simon squints through Becky's horrible texting quirk—she's over five hundred years old; she should know better—another push notification jolts him even wider awake.

Dima: Call me.

The message breaks weeks of silence. Years ago, even months ago, Simon would have jumped to obey as if enthralled by Dima's gift. But Dima never needed such tricks to control him.

Tonight, ignoring Dima is easy. Phone in hand, Simon rushes upstairs. Still in his favorite pajamas, barefoot, unarmed. He needs to find Cody.

Easy enough. Just follow the anxious metronome of footsteps. Cody is pacing the next floor up, still below ground. At Simon's arrival, Cody whirls and stops. His clothes are disheveled, and the dark-papered walls seem too narrow to hold his distress. Even from twenty feet away, his heartbeat pounds a painful staccato.

Simon's phone chimes again. He ignores it. "What's wrong?"

Cody's voice is ragged when he answers. "This afternoon. Authorities found a body in the woods."

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Chapter 24

Cody

Panic sharpens each of Cody's senses. The world moves too slowly, giving him more time to cycle through painful thoughts. He couldn't have. He must have. He wouldn't. He did.

Every time he wakes after a bad shift, he fears having hurt someone. It's never come true before.

Tobias left in the morning, before the story broke. Cody slept most of the afternoon and didn't see the news until he woke up. The past three hours have been agonizing, waiting to face Simon.

Reviewing the scant evidence only deepened Cody's dread. The victim was a woman in her twenties. Not yet identified. No further description of her appearance or injuries.

Now that Simon is awake, Cody would rather return to waiting. Any tenuous faith between them is gone. Cody's hands clench, fingernails still blunt, the promise of claws stinging beneath the surface.

Simon will be horrified too. Maybe even guilty for persuading Cody to stay outside last night—Simon's too nice. Too responsible, even though he hides it behind centuries of arrogant vampire bullshit. Cody's ready to insist this isn't Simon's fault. Just his. Cody was so foolishly eager to accept Simon's invitation. To stretch his legs, to sing in the moonlight, to soothe his own soul at the risk of somebody else's life.

Cody's fault. Not Simon's.

"Preliminary reports say the humans are looking into an animal attack," Cody forces out.

Instead of horrified, Simon just looks confused. "Wait, do you think you killed this person?"

Cody cringes inside. He shouldn't have to prove his guilt. The circumstantial evidence is clear. "I was outside last night. I can't remember most of it. I could have done anything."

"Tobias was watching from the porch," Simon says, far too calmly. "I watched you from the cameras, too."

“Did you have eyes on me the entire night?” Cody asks, already knowing the answer.

Simon falls silent. His phone chimes twice. He ignores it, all his concern focused on Cody, who doesn’t deserve it.

“I reviewed the footage,” Cody says, desperate to make him understand. “There’s a one-hour stretch where I’m out of sight. I could have jumped the fence, easy.”

“I need taller fences, then.” Simon props his hands on his hips, frowning down his nose at Cody despite his smaller frame. “Stop panicking and start thinking, wolf. You came back before dawn, and I saw you. I spent twenty minutes scratching your ears. If you had killed someone, I would have smelled blood on you.”

Cody’s fear stumbles over the logical tripwire.

Simon’s hair is still tangled with sleep, and his feet are bare. He’s wearing long flannel pajamas, dark red with a pattern of tiny white bats. Cody would normally spend ten minutes teasing Simon about how cute he looked, before enthusiastically apologizing. Now, he just feels guilty that Simon raced up out of misplaced concern.

“It could have worn off,” Cody says. “I wouldn’t have to get soaked in blood to kill someone.”

“I’m a *vampire*,” Simon counters, with convincing disdain, before a sharp melody interrupts. He snarls at his phone. “One second, someone is… Fuck.”

Face an expressionless mask, Simon lets the phone ring twice before putting it to his ear.

“Hello, Dima.”

Cody’s shoulders lock with tension. Dima has no right to call Simon—but Cody has no right to resent him. Dima’s just a self-centered, neglectful sire. Cody’s a monster lurking in Simon’s home.

“I’ve heard the rumor,” Simon answers, lowering his eyes. The other half of the conversation is too muffled to interpret, even to Cody’s keen ears. After another moment, Simon replies, “The culprit remains unknown.”

Cody still can’t understand Dima’s words, but he can make a damn good guess.

“I’m the one who needs to feel comfortable,” Simon says. “I don’t need a new bodyguard.”

Simon lifts a hand and glares, cutting Cody off before he can say anything. Fuck. Agreeing with the creepy vampire elder wasn’t on Cody’s to-do list, but it’s true. Cody can’t stay here if he can’t trust himself.

He doesn’t know where he’ll go. Turn himself in to the treaty

council, probably. But he can't stay with Simon.

Then Simon hisses, eyes flashing red. "Don't call me that, and don't pretend you still give a shit about me. Go ahead, cancel. I'll pay for my own damn bodyguard."

Silence rings through the hallway.

"Anything else, *sire*?" Simon asks, with seething sweetness.

The next reply sounds softer.

"If you insist," Simon says, and hangs up. He stares at the phone for the length of two slow heartbeats. "Dima will be here tomorrow night. I intend for his stay to be brief."

Cody exhales, deflated. "Maybe he's right."

"No, he isn't." Simon doesn't sound angry anymore. Just sad. "He's a controlling bastard who only cares about me when it suits him."

"I don't like him," Cody says. "But you'd be safer without me here. I can't trust myself anymore. Simon, I killed someone."

"I need you to stop being a fucking idiot." Simon slips his phone in his pocket. "I haven't been attacked since we visited the Broken Cross, when you chased off the attacker. If someone found my pet werewolf inconvenient, wouldn't getting rid of you suit their aims?"

Cody can't answer through the new pang of guilt. The initial threat hasn't gone away, and Cody doesn't know how to fix everything at once.

This is why he needs a pack. Someone to temper his reckless impulses. Someone to focus on, someone to protect, besides himself.

That could be Simon, part of him still wishes.

Simon's gaze falters in the silence. "If you truly want to leave, then get the fuck out. I'm very good at saying goodbye."

The pain is clear in his words. Simon is right. Running away or locking himself up won't fix anything. If Cody didn't kill the person in the woods, another predator is out there. Even if he did…

Simon is more than a principal now. There aren't protocols for what Cody feels. But there are instincts, and protection isn't just fighting someone's battles for them. Being pack means mutual protection. It means making each other stronger.

There's one easy way to restore Simon's power.

"I want to stay," Cody says. "But only if you can defend yourself."

Simon's tension reveals itself in its sudden absence. His smile is bright. "I have plenty of silver bullets."

"No, I mean—" Cody takes a deep breath, nervous despite his conviction. This is the right thing to do, and he wants it, but it still goes against everything he's been taught. "If you were drinking fresh

blood, you would have healed by now, right?"

Simon's attention falls to Cody's neck. "I don't trust anyone enough. Another hit of poisoned blood could kill me."

Cody hates the thought of Simon drinking from someone else too. Because of the threat of poison. Not because—

All right, fine. Definitely because of the possessiveness burning in his heart. Cody lifts his chin, baring his throat. "Do you trust me?"

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Chapter 25

Simon

Dead bodies and meddling sires suddenly don't matter. Surely Cody can't mean—but he does, clearly, by the way his gaze drops to Simon's lips. Cody is offering his own blood.

Simon's thirst is fire rolling down his veins and coiling in his lungs. Scorching desire begging to be quenched.

He knows how to ride out the bloodlust. He doesn't know how to cope with the truth of his answer. "I do trust you." Simon inhales deeply, tasting Cody on the back of his tongue. "Would you let me?"

Cody draws forward, filling the hallway. His palm hovers inches from Simon's cheek. "Yes."

Heat caresses Simon's jawline, even without touch. "You're a werewolf," Simon says, as if either of them could forget. He needs to spell this out, because Cody clearly isn't thinking straight. "I'm a vampire. Would you really let me drink your blood?"

"Yes," Cody repeats, as his hand curves against Simon's face.

Simon leans in, shaky as a fledgling. Even shakier with the look of glassy awe in Cody's eyes.

"My blood shouldn't affect you weirdly, right?" Cody asks.

"It won't," Simon says, though anticipation shivers through him. Lycanthropy can't be passed through blood, but the fact that Cody is offering is dizzying. Simon's fangs ache with need, sharpening already. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"Yes," Cody says again—this time more a growl than a word. "I'm not just okay. I want you to drink from me." His hand tenses against Simon, and certainty blazes in his eyes. "Just me. Nobody else."

Disbelief vanishes in a curl of ash. Simon catches Cody's wrist. "Then you may want to sit down."

He isn't strong enough to move Cody by force, but Cody stumbles willingly with him. The nearest room is the kitchen, dark except for the hallway light following them. Cody's eyes glint like stars in the shadows.

"Sit," Simon orders, pulling out a chair.

Cody yanks Simon with him. “You sit.”

The chair creaks in protest.

Simon crawls into Cody’s lap, barely sitting before heavy hands pin him by the hips. Every sense heightens. Denim and flannel tickle the insides of his thighs with every slight movement. Fuck, Simon would never let most people see him in the silly bat pajamas. Every vamp chaser at the Broken Cross would be so disappointed. But Simon isn’t putting on a show tonight. He trusts Cody to want him without any performance.

“Stay,” Cody says, half a joke, half a plea.

Arousal fills Simon’s cock, but that need is distant compared to hunger. Cody is already completely hard beneath him. Desire makes his blood sing for Simon.

“You smell so good,” Simon whispers in Cody’s ear. His lips brush delicate skin, winning a shudder. He tugs the collar of Cody’s t-shirt away and rubs the solid muscle of his shoulder. “I didn’t expect you to be in the mood tonight.”

“We’re not fucking.” Cody’s hands slip beneath Simon’s pajama shirt, as if his extremities aren’t listening to his own words. “I’m just helping you heal.”

Simon leans back slightly, trusting Cody to hold him balanced, and places a finger beneath Cody’s chin. His smile alone wins another shudder from the werewolf beneath him. “Trust me, this will be so much better than fucking.”

He seals Cody’s lips with his. Cody kisses back with a groan, pulse rising with each promise of teeth. Each exhale floods hot into Simon’s lungs.

When Simon speaks again, it’s with borrowed breath. “You know you didn’t kill anyone last night.”

Cody sighs. “You’re right. It wouldn’t make sense.” He tilts his head, stretching out his stubbled, sun-kissed throat. “I still want to give you this.”

Simon can’t resist the invitation. Slowly, deliberately, he kisses the juncture of neck and left shoulder. Warm skin welcomes his lips. Cody’s pulse is quick with nervous arousal.

Enough foreplay.

Simon bites deep and swift. Cody’s skin parts with precision. There’s always an instant before blood fills the mouth, an instant filled instead with anticipation. Then—as Cody jerks with a delayed pain response—the blood spills.

Nobody has ever tasted this sweet before. Like moonlight. Like fire. Like adoration.

Simon whimpers with bliss. Eyes closed, he withdraws his fangs and latches onto the wounds. Not a drop escapes his sealed lips. He clutches Cody's shoulders, as if Cody might push him away. Unlikely, when Cody holds him just as tightly. Illogical fear slips away as Simon's mind blanks with pleasure.

Strength pours into him. Freshly taken, willingly given. Cody's blood washes away Simon's weakness and feeds the dormant embers of magic. Sparks dance behind Simon's eyelids as he becomes whole again.

A low moan reverberates between them. Simon isn't sure whose. Cody's blood tastes like nothing he's ever tasted before. The same sweet metallic flavor, yes, but with a deeper richness. Something wild and intoxicating. More than mere satiation. Simon is getting drunk on the taste of his werewolf.

The thought is sweeter than the blood, brighter than the magic. One word echoes Cody's all-consuming pulse:

Mine. Mine. Mine.

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Chapter 26

Cody

Pain fades into euphoria, spiraling higher with each pulse of blood. Each swallow sharpens the clarity of pleasure. Cody had expected the drug-like haze vampires are known for. This is so much more.

Cody had been nervous, of course. Treaty or not, blood drinking is still dangerous. But Simon is experienced enough to feed without harming, and Cody is strong enough to break free if something goes wrong.

That's the logical risk assessment. Really, all logic paled before Simon's incredulous face. Cody had shocked Simon with the offer. He likes that.

He also likes this: Simon, curled in his lap, clutching him so tightly. Despite the inherent violence of the bite, Cody's raging emotions settle. Fear and guilt seep away, already broken on the rocks of Simon's conviction. His muscles loosen. His wolf feels tranquil, protective urges soothed. Even when Simon moves against his aching cock.

Cody's mate is still in danger, and he hasn't found the source of the threat, but he isn't helpless. He can heal his mate with his blood. That's worth any amount of pain.

Wait.

Cody's breath hitches. Not his mate. He hasn't claimed Simon as his mate. He can't think like that, not after what happened to Simon's brother. Not mates, just… whatever they are to each other.

Even though this bite mirrors the claiming bite, and Cody already feels bound to Simon. This won't leave a scar, but it doesn't need to. The mark will linger in his memory.

Labels don't matter when having Simon in his arms feels so right.

Making a small sound, Simon grinds against Cody. His back tenses under Cody's hands, and whisper-soft hair brushes Cody's jaw. Cody's world narrows to quiet noises and the smell of his own blood.

Simon's faint, slow pulse beats harder. He was right. This is better than sex.

Cody doesn't know how long they remain locked together. It feels like hours, but it's probably only moments. With a tugging pain, Simon's lips leave his neck.

"I'll close it," Simon says quietly. "It won't scar, unlike…"

So, he's thinking about the mating bond, too.

Simon licks the wound, and the wet push of tongue breaks Cody from hazy bliss. His fingernails dig into Simon's back at the strange tingle. But the bleeding stops and the pain eases as Simon closes the bite.

When Simon pulls away, his mouth is red with blood. One droplet slides from the corner of his lips. Cheeks flushed pinker than Cody's ever seen them, Simon looks well-fed, well-fucked, and utterly content. Either that was as good for him as it was for Cody, or even better.

Cody's breathless at the sight. "Wow."

Simon's eyes are wide and unfocused, still brilliant red. He blinks rapidly, as if shaking himself awake. "Are you all right?"

"Hell of an understatement," Cody says, and holds Simon still by the back of his neck.

Simon melts into the bloody kiss. The taste of Cody's own blood is unexpectedly arousing. Not as delicious as Simon seems to find it—Cody likes it because of Simon's hunger. Because blood is proof Cody's taking care of his mate.

Not his mate. Fuck. Cody licks the stray droplet from Simon's chin.

Shivering beautifully, Simon presses his cool forehead to Cody's heaving chest. "Thank you."

"Any time," Cody says, and means it.

They drape together, warm and exhausted, all but post-coital. Staying here forever would be nice. Cody's still hard, but his arousal isn't urgent.

Eventually, Simon shifts his weight back. Cody can't help his small growl of protest, but he reluctantly loosens his grip.

Simon stands with new, fluid grace. His pajama shirt is askew, exposing one pale shoulder, but he looks regal. Every shadow in the kitchen is part of his raiment.

"Want to see a magic trick?" Simon asks with a flourish.

A ribbon of fire blossoms above his hand.

Cody nearly knocks his chair over jumping to his feet. The brief jolt of fear isn't a werewolf thing. Anyone would have a reaction to surprise fire. But Cody's instinct quickly scatters into wonder. "Holy shit. You can—you have magic?"

Firelight dances across Simon's pale face. His eyes are bright blue-green again, his hunger sated. "The shadow-gift grants myriad powers, especially when a vampire is sired with ancient blood. Tania could turn into a swarm of bats. Francisco could vanish into fog." With a showman's smirk, Simon snaps his fingers. The flame vanishes. "I have fire."

Darkness deepens across the kitchen.

"Wow," Cody says again. "I'm guessing you're feeling better."

In a blur, Simon stands beside the fridge. One heartbeat later, he's in front of Cody again. "What are you thinking?"

A million things. Relief that Simon is strong again. Pride in having helped. Cody wants more magic tricks, more showing off, more cold touches. He wants to learn how to paint better, to try and capture the light and shadow of Simon's face. He wants to bend Simon over the kitchen table and demonstrate exactly how impressed he is.

One sharp thought pushes above the rest. "You're amazing," Cody says. "No wonder other vampires are scared of you."

Sunlight. Wooden stakes. Fire. Not many things can harm a vampire. Simon must have been quite the threat during treaty negotiations.

Simon gives the particular smile that Cody is starting to recognize as sad. "Francisco was much more popular at parties. No need for fog machines. Enough about the magic, though."

Slim fingers trace a possessive caress over Cody's lips, not quite pushing into his mouth. Cody's never been so sensitive to touch before. When they part, Simon's fingers are wet with remnants of blood.

"You say you aren't a detective," Simon says—and slowly licks the blood from his fingers.

Cody swallows hard. "I'll be anything you want me to be."

"Good answer." Simon's grin turns devilish. "Tomorrow night, before Dima gets here. You and I have a crime scene to inspect."

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Chapter 27

Simon

Simon flits from room to room, shedding sparks with every snap of his fingers. *Snap* lights the sconces in the private parlor. *Snap* lights the bathing chamber. *Snap* lights the coffin room, and *snap* lights the closet that's almost as big. Obedient flames dance on their perches, illuminating Simon's coffin.

The poison is cured. Blood sings in Simon's cold heart, flickering hot as a flame itself. Simon feels alive with power—and gratitude. The taste of fresh blood and warm skin, the feel of strong hands caging gently around him. The sheer wonder in Cody's dark eyes…

Simon had to flee downstairs fast, before anything irrational left his lips.

Like asking what the werewolf mating bond is really like. Cody wouldn't know. He's been alone for years—just like Simon. If Cody had a mate, he wouldn't fear his own nature.

How strange that a werewolf would trust a vampire above his own instincts. Cody doesn't fear Simon's nature anymore. He offered his blood. Reveled in Simon's magic. If Simon had asked for more, Cody would have given it, because he trusted Simon not to ask for too much.

Just like Simon trusts the evidence before him. Cody didn't kill the stranger in the woods.

Even if Cody had killed someone, Simon's sure there would be a good reason. But that line of thinking seemed unlikely to comfort Cody, so Simon refrained from mentioning it.

That still leaves an unsolved death, practically on Simon's doorstep. Giddiness melts away, and Simon halts at his closet door. He needs more information. Precisely how close is this dead body? Are human authorities working with paranormal authorities yet? The local hunters' guilds must already be talking to local pack leaders. Suspicious animal attacks are a warning sign older than Simon.

He should start with the pile of unanswered text messages. Rumor travels faster than ever with newfangled technology, and every vampire in the time zone woke to the same news.

Including Dima, who knows about Cody.

Simon doesn't want to think about that now. Dima was the one who forced a bodyguard on Simon in the first place. Now he wants to take Cody away. Familiar hurt burns with a new edge of anger. If Dima expects Simon to roll over and comply this time, he's mistaken.

Disagreement might be good for their relationship. They both need to remember Simon isn't a fledgling anymore. Simon needs to remember he isn't infatuated anymore, either.

Or lonely.

Not for now, at least. There's the pesky matter of time, ever shambling forward. Cody will grow and live and change. Simon will remain as always, a statue carved by the shadow-gift.

Someday, by choice or necessity, their paths will diverge.

Simon flips past hangers of clothing. He can deal with his sire tomorrow. He can deal with the onslaught of time even later than that. First, there's everyone else who knows Simon was hanging out with a werewolf recently. Perhaps causing a scene at the Broken Cross was a mistake. He should start with Kimiko. Because he likes her the most, and because he'll literally never hear the end of it otherwise.

Decision made, he changes clothes with unnecessary speed—he's missed the rush of paranormal haste. The pajamas are comfortable, but he wants to feel a little more prepared for the day. He chooses a soft gray sweater…

…and his red leather pants, to surprise Cody with later. Who needs mirrors when he can see the reaction in Cody's face?

Pleased with himself, Simon shuts his coffin, then perches on the lid. A long heartbeat steadies his emotions. Mustn't call his friend all giddy and blood-drunk. Then he makes the call.

Kimiko answers on the fifth ring. "Hello, dear friend."

The familiar voice takes Simon aback. "So, you do know how to use your phone."

"'Hello, my beloved Kimiko! Your voice is an unparalleled melody in my ears!'" Kimiko says, in a falsetto that sounds nothing like Simon. Then her voice drops back to normal. "That's what you're supposed to say."

"My mistake," Simon says politely. "Hark! What a unique noise."

The sound she makes in reply is not polite at all. "I sent Andrea on an errand. I'm operating this damned contraption myself, and you should be grateful. Don't tell Andrea I answered the phone, by the way. She does like to feel important."

Simon swings his legs. They could small-talk all night, but he's impatient. "To what do I owe the honor?"

Kimiko hushes, though she's hopefully alone in her office. "There was a mysterious mauling five miles from your home."

A dramatic pause ensues.

"I've heard," Simon says obligingly.

"The night of the full moon."

"So it was."

"And you've adopted a new pet," Kimiko concludes, with gossip-hungry glee.

"The mauling wasn't Cody," Simon says, for what feels like the hundredth time tonight. Though the assumption is more reasonable on Kimiko's part than Cody's own.

"Oh." Kimiko pauses, processing the information. She at least trusts Simon without arguing. "Quite the coincidence, then."

That's the real problem. Cody is innocent, but coincidences are suspicious. "If you happen upon the gory details, I'd appreciate a call. Especially since you clearly know how."

"I never should have answered," Kimiko grumbles, then sighs in deliberate affectation. "But it can't be helped. My dear Andrea is still miffed about your visit last month."

Simon frowns, thinking back. Far more exciting things happened that night—the second attack, Cody bleeding, Cody almost kissing him. Using his years and power to pull rank on Andrea had been rather rude, though.

"She was rude first," Simon points out. "Does she want an apology card?"

"God no, she would never forgive that." Kimiko sighs again. "However, she recalls you were keeping a werewolf around. She wants to report Cody as a suspect to the treaty council."

Simon's every impulse resists the idea.

A reasonable investigation would find exactly what Simon found. Cody can't have anything to do with the attack. Unless they consider Simon's testimony biased.

And Cody has a history of uncontrolled, blackout shifts.

Simon doesn't want to count on a reasonable investigation. Not until he knows more. "Can you stop Andrea from reporting?"

"Of course," Kimiko replies cheerfully. "But I only owe you one more favor. This would clear the debt between us."

"Do it," Simon says, without hesitation.

After a beat of silence, Kimiko laughs. "Simon Caley, trading a favor on a werewolf's behalf. Now that is interesting."

Simon rubs his temple. An emotional reflex more than a true

headache. “Don’t read too much into it.”

“You must visit again soon,” Kimiko says, sounding far too happy. “I want to watch your face as I interrogate you.”

“Begone, foul creature,” Simon says, and hangs up to the music of his friend’s laughter. Fuck. He probably should visit her more. Apparently socializing is good for him.

If he wants to keep *socializing* with his werewolf bodyguard, Simon has yet another unsolved attack to investigate. He waves a hand, and in a giddy sparkle of magic, all the sconces wink out in his wake. Next step is checking the human news, and he can do that as easily from the library as down here.

More importantly, he can lounge provocatively, for when Cody finds him.

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Chapter 28

Cody

Trees and earth and wildlife soften the acrid smell of the distant road. Moonlight paints the scene silver between the shadows. Yesterday's panic and elation alike have faded, leaving wary rationality in their wake. Cody feels stable. Determined. His purpose walks at his side.

"I'll get the gate," Simon says when they reach the fence. His dark red coat fits perfectly, giving the illusion of height. Or maybe that's the intensity of presence he's had since drinking Cody's blood.

Simon looks good tonight, beyond his usual ageless elegance. Last night's flush is gone, but his lips are pinker and his eyes brighter than before. All traces of stiffness have vanished. Cody hadn't realized how much effort Simon spent to hide his frailty.

The electric lock beeps, and Simon slides the mechanical latch too.

"Let me go first," Cody says, before Simon can open the gate. Simon might be cured, but protecting him is still Cody's responsibility.

He half expects an argument, but Simon simply smiles. "Excellent idea. I'll enjoy watching your back."

Cody shakes a finger. "I'm on the clock."

"Yes, yes, look but don't touch." Simon's expression is angelic. "I learned patience before your great-great-great-grandfather was born."

Cody's growing fond of Simon's weird little vampire jokes. The accusations of graverobbing, peppered with abominable modern slang. As Cody pushes open the gate, though, he wonders if there's more to the undead sense of humor. He considers the matter while he surveys the clear space before the tree line.

When he finds nothing, he asks, "Does it bother you that I'm only twenty-eight?"

Simon looks up sharply but doesn't answer until the gate is closed. "Time passes differently for us. We experience so much more, but we don't truly age. In a sense, you're older than I'll ever be." Simon shrugs. "No, your age doesn't bother me."

The answer is sincere, but easy. Too easy. So that isn't it. Cody leads the way to the border between lawn and wilderness. "Do you

think I should be bothered that you're over four hundred?"

Silence reveals the successful hit.

"I actually think it's kind of hot," Cody says—and grins at the sound of stumbling behind him.

Sure enough, Simon tries to cover his surprise with an accusation. "So, you're a pervert."

"Probably."

"We'll psychoanalyze you later," Simon says. "At length. Do you smell anything yet?"

Forest rises around them, and Cody inhales. He's spent his life in cities since getting kicked out, but he still knows how to move quietly through nature. Simon makes even less noise, and his scent has become more familiar than Cody's own. Suspicious elements should stand out.

"Just normal nature. Lot of deer out here." Cody inhales again. He needs to focus. They're on a deadline. "Did Dima say when he's showing up?"

"He never answered," Simon says, clearly annoyed. "Which means we can take as long as we need. He can wait on the porch."

Cody hesitates. He doesn't want to be a wedge between Simon and his sire. There's too much history Cody doesn't know yet. Even if the growly, primal side of him loves the thought of keeping Simon to himself. Shoving everyone else away—especially Dima.

"I don't blame him for worrying about you," Cody says instead. See, he can be normal amounts of possessive. "Mysterious animal attacks on the full moon are suspicious as hell."

"Quite," Simon replies. "About ten yards north we'll hit an old trail. We can follow that northeast."

Their goal isn't to invade the actual crime scene. The area should still be roped off, and interfering would get them in trouble with all sorts of law enforcement. They just want to sneak around the edges, discovering what they can with inhuman senses.

Cody spent his waking hours flipping through local news sites. Social media channels. Fielding supportive but unhelpful messages from Tobias. The media still hasn't identified the victim. Law enforcement still hasn't confirmed her cause of death, either, beyond 'probably an animal attack.'

That might be the only story ever told. Without witnesses, most paranormal attacks don't even need a cover-up. The next story hits the news cycle, and the old story goes to an overworked cold case team. People fill in the blanks with whatever makes sense.

Just like Cody did, when he heard someone died the night he

shifted. Hell, it's possible this really was a bear attack.

Half a mile down the trail, Simon asks, "Do you smell any traces of yourself?"

"No," Cody says, then takes another long sniff. Just in case.

"You don't sound happy about that."

"Someone's still dead," Cody says. "If I didn't kill her, someone or something else did."

Another few steps of silence, beneath rustling trees and chorusing insects. "Would you smell everything better as a wolf?" Simon asks.

Cody would rather be able to communicate clearly in this situation, and he doesn't trust his wolf to remember everything. All of that would be different if he and Simon were mates. "Not enough to matter. My nose is still good when I'm—"

The wind changes. Cody stops, and Simon goes rigid behind him.

"Blood," Simon says, with barely a breath.

Cody's assessment is just as quick. The scent is faint, not fresh. Underscored by traces of the human who bled. Something familiar tugs Cody's mind, but he can't find the right memory.

"This way." Cody touches Simon's shoulder, reassured by the cold strength. "Stay close."

The scent leads them off the trail, first through brush, then onto a narrow deer track. Cody's gun slips into his hand, its weight a reminder that humans are good at leveling the playing field. He won't underestimate human adversaries.

"The blood is getting fainter," Simon says, close at his elbow. Naturally, he's more sensitive to blood than anything else.

Cody continues on the same trail. "The person's overall scent is stronger this way. There's something familiar about it, but I can't quite… Here."

There's nobody nearby, dead or alive, but the scent intensifies around a fork in the path. A leafy thicket borders the junction. Cody casts around, ensuring they're alone. Then he crouches to inspect the bushes.

"What is it?" Simon asks quietly.

Cody drags the backpack out to the narrow trail. The scent is even stronger now, strong enough to spark a clearer memory. But he doesn't want to give voice to it yet. He can't believe she would do this.

Even though the bright floral patches don't give him hope.

Wordlessly, Simon lifts his hand. Flame spirals around his fingers, illuminating the area.

Cody would marvel at the sight, but right now, all he feels is

dread. He gingerly sifts through the backpack's contents. Nothing he finds is a surprise. Wooden stakes. A flask marked with runes—real holy water. Silver bullets. A handgun, unloaded. A black ski mask.

Cody holds the last item up. "These are the mask and gun from the attack in the parking garage. I recognize the scent, now that it's clear. From that time, and from before."

"You know who it is?" Simon asks.

Cody re-zips the bag, and with a deep breath rises to his feet. "Lawrence's roommate."

"Erica?" Simon's face is stark with shadow and flame. "But she was so normal! She was just… someone."

Someone with bright red hair, floral overalls, and a kind face. Someone who was worried about her roommate. Someone who didn't move like a fighter.

"Lawrence was just someone too, until he became obsessed with vampires," Cody points out. He's starting to doubt his own assessment. "Or was she faking it when we visited?"

"No," Simon says immediately. "Or she was the best actor I've met in centuries. My kind is good at catching tells. Hearing heartbeats and all that. If Erica was lying to me, she was a professional."

"She wasn't." Cody thinks back to the security footage. His brief glimpses of the attacker, memory sharpened by pain and protective instincts. "Her aim was terrible, and she held her gun like an amateur. But she didn't hesitate to shoot. What could change someone's personality like that?"

Simon crouches, peering at the weapons and supplies without touching them. "Some sort of spell, perhaps. Maybe the same witch Lawrence got the poison from? But the only thing I've ever seen change someone like that is…"

Silence crashes and echoes.

Cody's heartbeat quickens, and he knows Simon will hear it. "What's wrong?"

The fire extinguishes as Simon straightens up. Fluid and strong, just as he's been since drinking Cody's blood. But his eyes are wide and fragile as ice.

"I light fires," Simon says quietly. "Tania turned into bats, and Francisco turned into fog. Dima enthralls people to do his bidding."

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Chapter 29

Simon

The idea is a stone falling into water, each ripple a tidal wave. Simon struggles to surface.

"Dima is behind this," he says, and it feels true. Human attackers without any connection to the paranormal. Dima refusing to call the treaty council to investigate.

But other details don't make sense. Who killed Erica? If it was Dima, why would he kill his own puppet—just tying up loose ends? Why hire Cody to protect Simon?

Why not just kill Simon by his own hand?

It would have been easy.

"That doesn't make sense." Cody echoes Simon's thoughts. "He hired me to protect you. Why the fuck would he want to kill you?"

"I don't know." Simon lifts a hand, then drops it, uncertain of what he's doing. Flame sparks around his fingertips before extinguishing. "I don't know him anymore. Maybe I never did."

"Shit, Simon." Cody's hand heats Simon's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

The touch is too comforting. Simon wrenches away. He can't stand the admission of being hurt. "Give me a second. I need to think."

"We don't have a second," Cody says, gentle yet urgent. He pulls out his own phone. "Dima is on his way here. Doesn't matter if he's involved or not—we can figure that out when we're somewhere safe."

Safety is ephemeral. A flame smothered by the rippling water. Simon clings to details to keep himself in the present. "Who are you calling?"

"Tobias," Cody answers. "He'll send a car to meet us on the road, so we don't have to go back to the house."

"Don't call him," Simon says, paranoid reflex faster than thought.

Cody cancels the call without question. The instinctive trust would be gratifying if Simon wasn't still in shock. "What's wrong?"

Simon barely knows Tobias. Not like Cody. But there's more than just Simon's habitual wariness of strangers. "Tobias met Dima in

person. What if Dima enthralled him?"

Cody's face slackens, then hardens with a snarl. "It's possible. He shouldn't have been so tired." Another snarl. "I should have noticed something was off."

Forgetting the latch might not have been an accident.

"Don't blame yourself." More sparks dance around Simon's fingers. He's fled town before. He knows how to do this. "We have to go back to the house. If we're running, I need my car."

Cody nods sharply. He puts his phone away and draws his gun again. "You wait here. I'll get it."

"No," Simon snaps. Then on a softer breath, "It's safer together. We aren't human, so Dima can only enthrall one of us at a time. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

Simon expects an argument. For Cody to insist on doing his job, when this is far beyond contracts and protocols. Instead, Cody's face softens, and he slides a gentle hand against Simon's cheek.

"Good," Cody murmurs. "Because I'm not letting you out of mine."

He seizes Simon's lips in a burning, grounding kiss. Calluses scrape Simon's cheek, and he leans in for more, no longer capable of denying the comfort offered. Cody's touch feels like a heartbeat, and Simon wants this forever.

Anything could happen. Simon still tastes the precious gift of Cody's blood. He can't let Cody disappear out of sight, like Francisco and Tania and so many others. All the mortals he's ever known, lost between moments and years.

He and Cody aren't bound by any lasting bite. Cody isn't as strong as he could be. Simon can't find him if he vanishes. The idea burns his lips, trying to break free. But now isn't the time for impulsive demands.

Cody pulls away, looking just as reluctant as Simon. "Stay close behind me."

Simon grabs Erica's backpack. "Easy enough. Like I said, I love the view."

The joke falls flat as the backpack thumps his shoulder. He might need its contents—stakes and holy water, against his own sire.

Cody thankfully doesn't say anything more before taking off. They race through forest corridors, quicker and quieter than any mortal could. As they run, Simon remembers vividly, violently the night he turned.

He was twenty years old and high off a late-night performance. His third week playing the latest in a string of beautiful ingenues. Women weren't supposed to be on stage, not at that time and place, so young

men like Simon filled those roles. He thrived on the attention. Exhausted, elated, Simon had been stripping off his bodice when a stranger slipped backstage. The other players turned away, poorly muffling their laughter. A temporary pretense of privacy that would turn to taunting later.

The stranger was a nobleman, his hawkish features recognizable from the audience that night. And the previous night, and the one before that too. Already, the centuries had washed the color from his marble-cold skin. His pale eyes were haunting, but his voice was irresistible when he asked Simon to join him for a meal.

Simon had accepted such offers before, but never so eagerly. They spoke all night and didn't even kiss until Dima departed at dawn. The pattern repeated for a week, and Simon quickly sensed something was wrong with the mysterious aristocrat.

"Not wrong," Dima said when asked. "Special. I think you could be special too."

The attention was better than any performance. Simon couldn't resist the promise of a costume he didn't have to remove. He bared his neck eagerly for the shadow-gift.

Until tonight, Simon had never wondered if Dima had enthralled him. If accepting the shadow-gift wasn't a choice at all.

Just as likely Simon made the fateful choice. He was a reckless youth anyway, easily tempted. But even the doubt sickens him, like a fresh dose of poison. Century after century, he'd clung to one cold truth. No matter how many promises he broke, when it truly mattered, Dima would always return. No matter how implausible, Dima always truly cared for him.

The curtain has fallen. The masks have shattered. But Simon isn't alone. His heart sings with the strength of Cody's blood. Every touch, rough or tender, fleeting or purposeful. Somehow, Simon trusts Cody not to leave him.

Cody slows as they approach the fence, and Simon keeps close. Not because he's obedient. He just wants to.

"I don't sense him," Simon whispers, both relieved and disappointed.

"I don't smell him, either." Cody reaches for the gate. His every move is focused. "Anything you need at the house?"

His coffin. His record collection. His painting supplies. The walls themselves, the promise of every unfinished mural.

"Just the car," Simon says. "The key's in the kitchen."

Cody leads the way across the lawn. Each second stretches with anxiety, exposing them under the moonlight. But nothing happens.

They reach the side door safely.

Strange hopes lighten Simon's mood as they slip inside. As if familiar walls reinforce his emotional scaffolding. He grabs the keys from the kitchen drawer, then follows Cody towards the garage.

This may not be a true flight. He may be able to come back. If they can report everything to the treaty council after reaching safety. If Dima is taken into custody. If this is all a misunderstanding, and Dima can explain everything, and they find the real mastermind, and—

Out of sight, the front door opens. Then clicks shut.

Simon halts, cold veins turning to ice.

Cody swears and shoves Simon towards the garage door. "It's him. Run."

Of course it's him. Echoes of centuries weigh down the very air. Simon wonders that his knees don't buckle from the pressure. His voice is faint. "I can't run from him."

Dima's reply comes from everywhere and nowhere. It chills the back of Simon's neck, all the way from the foyer. "Why would you run, my fledgling? Come to me."

Simon can't resist the full force of the sire-bond. His limbs move under the control of a mind that can't help but obey.

Cody plants himself in Simon's way, a solid wall of muscle and fury. "Go downstairs," Cody growls, placing a hand on Simon's chest. "He blocked his scent somehow—I can't smell him. He's planning something."

Simon pauses. The desperation in Cody's words cuts deep enough to fracture the enthrallment. For a moment.

But Simon isn't poisoned anymore. He seizes Cody's arm and flings him into the wall.

He's aware of everything; Dima doesn't control his thoughts. Cody's body crashes into wood and plaster, and the sound thunders through Simon's bones.

"I'm sorry," Simon gasps, wanting more than anything to stay. To make sure Cody's all right. But all he can do is walk forward.

With a snarl, Cody shoves to his feet and follows.

Simon stops at the edge of the foyer, twenty feet from where Dima waits. Like an ancient monarch in his throne room.

And Simon's first stupid instinct is relief at the sight of him. They'll talk. Dima will explain, and everything will be all right. Or at least everything will be the kind of wrong Simon has tolerated for centuries. Simon can survive that.

"Drop that bag," Dima says.

Simon drops it, and the enthrallment ends.

Dima looks as he ever has. Bone-white skin and glass-sharp eyes, no more alive than the marble beneath his boots. The marble is dustier than usual, and something else is different. As Dima's colorless gaze rakes over him, Simon realizes what it is. The last veneer of civility has fallen. Simon finally sees his sire without pretense.

Everything will not be all right.

Cody surges past and halts between them. Disheveled but thankfully unhurt. He aims a gun at Dima's heart with steady hands.

Dust scraping under his shoes, Simon edges around to see Dima, who regards them without moving. The calculation looks strangely like hesitation.

"So, you've figured it out, little firebird," Dima says. The hint of affection slices deep, cutting away any hope that Simon is mistaken.

"You want to kill me." Simon spreads his empty hands. He's proud they don't shake. "Why? Why all this theater?"

"I have my reasons." Dima smiles. "Alas, humans make such fallible pawns. Perhaps this is better. I can bid you farewell for old time's sake."

A strange amount of talking. Dima doesn't usually hesitate like this —but he's outnumbered. As powerful as he is, Dima can't enthrall both of them at once. A single werewolf? Yes. A single weakened vampire? Absolutely. But Simon is healed, and together, he and Cody are stronger than Dima.

Maybe Simon can get some information, before he…

Before he does what he has to do.

"Lawrence and Erica were your pawns," Simon says. He has so many questions, but Dima's admitted to this part already. "Why did you kill Erica?"

"You always cared about people," Dima replies, more insult than answer. "Your most charming weakness. Erica was a useful distraction. So was her death."

A new thought strikes like a wooden stake. "Was Tania's death useful to you?" Simon asks, magic burning beneath his skin.

"I didn't kill Tania," Dima says, unreadable. "I killed the hunter who killed her—then I let the rest play out. Unfortunately, the treaty held strong. But enough about history."

The cold hand of enthrallment seizes Simon before he can act on his fury. Dima knew what happened to Tania, and he kept it from Simon all these years. Simon's magic surges, but falters.

He can't move. It's up to Cody, now.

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Chapter 30

Cody

The words grate on Cody's already frayed nerves. He's a hair's breadth from emptying his chamber into the smirking bastard. Fuck the political consequences. Dima hurt Cody's mate, and he has to die. But Dima is old and powerful. Nothing less than a direct shot to the heart or spine will even slow him down. Cody needs a distraction to even the odds.

Something sharp like cinnamon irritates his nose. It isn't Dima, who blocked his scent somehow. Cody doesn't know how or why, but he knows that's a problem.

"That's not happening," Cody says, barely controlled. Anger builds within him. "How about you just answer Simon's questions?"

"Such a loyal dog," Dima drawls. "Have you been fucking him?"

"I've been protecting him," Cody snaps back. He doesn't dare take his eyes off the target. It doesn't make sense. Dima's the one who hired him. Why?

"None of my business, I suppose." Dima's gaze remains fixed on Cody, entirely disregarding Simon. Good. "I always thought Simon had better taste, but I hope he had a lovely final month."

"You aren't going to touch him," Cody growls, his entire body tensing. He can't find his usual professional calm in an emergency. This is like being caged during a full moon.

"Of course not." Dima's smile widens, frightfully sharp. "You'll do it for me."

The shot echoes before Cody registers pulling the trigger. He's still too slow. Dima sidesteps the bullet in an inhuman blur.

Sharp sweet cinnamon burns Cody's lungs. He shoots again. This bullet goes wide too—but Dima doesn't even have to dodge.

Simon doesn't move either.

A cough explodes from Cody's throat. His vision wavers. Animal fury surges hotter than blood. His gun clatters to the marble.

The dust on the ground. The cinnamon scent. Dima was stalling for it to take effect.

For it to force Cody to shift.

"He wants a scapegoat," Cody manages, with his last clear thought. "Human or werewolf. Simon, *run*."

Ears ringing, Cody collapses to his knees. The shift wrenches through him. Fabric rips away from his growing form. Back arching, claws driving past changing flesh. Even the worst shift has never hurt like this. Cody fights for sanity. Control.

Failing, he surrenders to a scarlet haze.

The world is different as a wolf. Harder to see, but so much clearer. The important things are all marked bright by scent and sound and heat. Bristling, the wolf inhales the stench of death-blood-enemy. He's in danger. His pack is in danger. He needs to protect his pack with fang and claw.

A vampire stands tall before him. *That's him. That's the enemy,* whispers something distant in his mind. The voice is Cody himself. His weak, worrying human side. The part that tries to chain him down. The part that doesn't listen.

The wolf won't chase prey without a scent. He turns to face the smaller vampire. The smell of fear is captivating. Strangely familiar, but the wolf's poison-muddled mind can't sort out those memories. Right now, the vampire smells like prey.

No! screams the other Cody.

The wolf prowls forward, jaws open to savor the scent.

This vampire is slow, small, easy prey. He doesn't run like he should, as if held by invisible chains. The wolf lunges, brute strength uncoiling.

They slam together, and in an instant, the vampire is beneath the wolf's paws, struggling on the ground.

Nothing separates the wolf's jaws from the vampire's fragile throat. His jaws are strong enough to sever a spine. He pauses in anticipation, savoring the look in the vampire's wide, bright eyes.

This is wrong.

The thought comes not from the stupid human self, but from the wolf. Possessive instinct pierces his fury. Dizziness surges, then resettles into a different pattern. However ravenous Cody is, this vampire isn't prey.

He's pack. He's mate.

He's mine.

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Chapter 31

Simon

Sparks blur the edge of Simon's vision, unable to break the enthrallment. He can't scream or try to shove away Cody's transformed weight. This is different from the previous shifts. Fear cuts deeper than the claws digging into Simon's shoulders. Not just for himself, but for Cody.

Once Cody has served his purpose, Dima will clean up loose ends. It all makes sense now. Apparently inspired by Tania's death, Dima wanted to pin Simon's murder on human hunters. When that didn't work, he found a werewolf with control issues. A high-profile interspecies murder—a platform Dima could use to rebel against the treaty. Simon and Cody's deaths would only be the beginning.

But right now, Simon only cares about the next few heartbeats. Fear for Cody's life. Guilt for getting Cody involved in this.

Regret for not asking Cody to claim him, so he could die belonging to Cody instead of Dima.

He barely hears Dima's chuckle over Cody's heaving breaths.

Even if Simon could call his magic now, he wouldn't use it against Cody. Simon falls limp, staring into his wolf's bright eyes, and waits for the end.

The end doesn't come.

Something flashes in Cody's eyes, and Simon feels the recognition in his own heart. Like a string tying them together, suddenly pulled taut.

Simon knows what will happen an instant before it does. With a last hard, skin-breaking push into Simon's shoulders, Cody lunges away. His snarl thunders through the foyer, and two monstrous bodies collide.

The enthrallment shatters in Dima's distraction. Simon flings himself to his feet in time to see Cody bear Dima to the floor. Blood sprays between them as Dima blocks Cody's jaws with his forearms. A lesser creature would have been snapped in two already.

Dima screeches with rage and frees one arm. He scrambles for Cody's fallen gun.

Simon kicks it out of the way.

Vibrating with rage, hurt, and magic, Simon stands at Cody's shoulder and stares down at his sire. The shadow he once thought would stay forever by his side. Now Dima's eyes narrow in pure hate, and his own dark blood flecks his lips.

Cody's jaws tighten, shattering radius and ulna with a loud snap.

"Any last words?" Simon asks, then shakes his finger. "Anything I would believe, I mean."

Dima laughs raggedly. "You always were my favorite."

Manipulative bastard.

Cody appears to be waiting for a cue. Smoldering in his own rage, Simon considers letting Cody finish the job. Watching those powerful jaws rip out Dima's throat would be cathartic.

But Cody's greatest fear is killing someone during an uncontrolled shift. Causing harm without remembering. Simon will gladly take that burden from him.

Letting Dima live isn't an option. Not after he threatened Cody.

"All right, Cody," Simon says, hardly hearing himself speak. Tendrils of flame twine between his fingers. "Let him go. I've got this."

Cody tears away in a cloud of blood. Before Dima can recover, Simon unleashes his magic. Ravenous flames rush forth and surround the prone figure.

Dima contorts with a bone-chilling shriek. The fire dances tall, igniting flesh and hair and clothing with equal enthusiasm. Skin shrivels from bone. White chars to black.

Simon staggers backwards, stomach twisting at the sight and stench. The visceral connection with his magic. He feels Dima's last keening screech as if it rips from his own throat. Then the final, choking gasp.

Seconds later, Dima is nothing more than fragments of bone. The flames sway, pushing against Simon's control, hungry for more.

Cody's broad head nudges Simon's hip. The support knocks him back to clarity, and he calls his magic back.

The foyer darkens, leaving only scorched marble and mangled remains.

Simon sinks to his knees. No longer nauseous, just cold. He reaches without thinking, and Cody's already pushing into his embrace. Still in wolf form, as comforting as ever. Simon flings his arms around Cody's neck and buries himself in the ruff. A million painful thoughts coalesce into a single truth.

“I love you,” Simon murmurs, muffled by the deep fur.

A sound trembles through him. Another, thin and fragile, until he inhales. Then laughter forces from his lips. Clutching Cody, Simon shakes with the absurd wheezing. He’s safe. Cody’s safe. Whatever happens next, they can handle it, because they’re together.

He laughs until he has no breath left, then breaks into a sob.

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Chapter 32

Cody

Safety and comfort gradually pull Cody from sleep. He wakes human and naked, curled up on stone—except his cheek, which is pillowed on denim. Slim fingers stroke through his hair. Cody inhales, savoring Simon's scent and touch.

Then he remembers everything.

Simon's fingers fall away as Cody forces himself to sit. He aches, reflexes slow and mind groggy. The surrounding stone chamber is creepy. Prison-like. But everything smells reassuringly of Simon—who sits with his back to a coffin and pedestal.

Cody drinks in the sight of him. No apparent injuries. Simon has changed into a tank top, and his feet are bare, but he's wearing the same jeans as earlier. So, Cody's been asleep for a while, but not too long.

Simon's face holds the calm that waits beyond panic's far border. He leans forward slowly, as if Cody's a skittish animal, and traces a cool line from temple to jaw. "Are you all right?"

Cody shudders through the rush of memories. The first whiff of poison. His teeth mere inches from Simon's throat. Recognition. Control. The taste of blood, and the violence of flame.

And afterwards, quiet words Cody hardly dares believe.

"Are *you* all right?" Cody counters, his voice rough.

"I think I am, thanks to you." Simon's smile is weak. "Dima is… well, the threat on my life is gone."

Shit. Cody tries pulling himself together. He has responsibilities to Simon and his job. "I need to call this in."

Simon grabs his wrist before he can stand. "I called Tobias already and told him what happened. He remembered the enthrallment as soon as Dima died. I called the treaty council, too. A representative will be here tomorrow night to begin the inquiry."

Cody's gut wrenches. He still needs to call Tobias—as a friend, not an employee. But Tobias has Aditi and the rest of his family right now. Cody is needed here. He flips their grip, so he's holding Simon's hand.

He wants to stroke away his lover's miserable expression. "How do you think that will go? We can still abscond to a remote location to keep you out of trouble."

Another weak smile brightens Simon's gloom. "Tobias can corroborate that Dima enthralled him. That and Kimiko's testimony about Lawrence should keep us out of hot water."

"Good." Cody feels insufficient. Words alone aren't enough, but he has to try. "Simon, I know Dima meant a lot to you. Are you really okay?"

Simon looks away, frozen. Then he softens. "I will be. I need time, and I have plenty of it. Tonight, I just want to think about us both being here."

Cody's heart flips. "I can work with that."

"There's one thing I don't understand," Simon says. "What happened when you shifted?"

The memory grates painfully. "That was some sort of poison. Dima blocked his scent, so I wouldn't go after him. Simon, I'm so sorry, I couldn't—"

"Obviously." Simon rolls his eyes. The brattiness is reassuring. "He was trying to force a treaty crisis. Werewolf bodyguard kills vampire. The story writes itself."

Guilt shudders through Cody. It was too close a call. "You have it all worked out. What don't you understand?"

"Why didn't it work?" Simon asks. "That wasn't a normal shift. You were out of your mind. Why didn't you kill me?"

The threat is gone. The job is over. It's still too soon for an honest conversation, but Simon's quiet patience pulls the words from Cody anyway. "I've had trouble controlling my wolf, ever since I got kicked out. But even drugged, I knew who you were." Cody swallows. There's no going back from this. "I knew what you were. Or at least, what I want you to be."

Simon tilts his head. He's entrancing as always, flimsy tank top hanging over death-white shoulders. "What is that?"

"My mate," Cody says.

Simon's eyes widen.

Cody can't stop talking now that he's started. "I knew you were mine. I couldn't hurt you. I've never been able to take control like that, and I remember everything. No blank spots. No matter what you want to do next, thank you for that."

Simon adjusts his posture, up onto his knees. A masklike expression hides his thoughts once more. "What do you mean, what I want to do next?"

Cody has to force the words out. His desire to do the right thing for Simon conflicts with his instinct to claim him. Simon spent centuries bonded to a monster. He can't be eager to tie himself to someone new. "Neither of us expected this job to end how it did. I'll understand if you never want to see me again. Even if you do… you agreed to let me take you out for a drink. We can just date like normal people."

"Because we're such normal people." Simon leans forward, tank top dropping past his collar bones, one hand braced next to Cody's thigh. His gaze is piercing. "You say it's up to me, which means you've decided what *you* want already."

Cody's bare skin prickles with Simon's nearness. He can't resist covering Simon's cold hand in his. With the jolt of touch, Cody isn't afraid of his own honesty anymore.

Settling his wolf used to be his deepest desire, but it's a side effect now. Cody wants to mind-speak with Simon while he's shifted. He wants to always know where Simon is. He wants every other werewolf to smell that Simon belongs to him.

He never dreamed of immortality until it meant night after night, year after year, forever with his mate.

"I want you," Cody says, and each word feels right. "For as long as you'll have me. You're the only pack I've ever wanted. I don't expect you to say yes, with what happened to your brother. But if you ever ask, I want to claim you as mine."

Cody's heartbeat is the only sound in a breathless moment.

Then Simon lights up in a wicked smile. "Does tonight work for you?"

"Tonight?" Cody repeats, certain he's misheard.

"Tonight." Simon's knee rests between Cody's thighs, mere inches from his stirring cock. "I've spent over four centuries waiting for you." Cool hands wind around Cody's neck, and a slight weight rests on his thigh. "Why should I wait any longer?"

Each word heats Cody's blood. He struggles for reason—but is it truly reasonable to resist? "I don't want you to regret anything. I'm moving fast by anyone's standards, normal or not, but especially from your perspective."

Simon shrugs. Which is distracting, because one side of his tank top completely gives up on clinging to his shoulder. "A year is scarcely longer than a month. A decade is more substantial, but anything could happen. Even though you'd look very attractive at thirty-eight." His cockiness wavers. "We can still wait, though. Immortality is a lot to process, and I don't want to—"

"We're not waiting on *my* account," Cody growls, and yanks Simon

closer. His blood rushes hotter with the flush on Simon's porcelain face. He affects Simon just as deeply as Simon affects him. "I remember everything from my shift tonight. Including what you said."

Simon's gaze darts away. "You're imagining things. You were deranged."

A foolish grin splits Cody's face. Simon's denial means Cody remembers correctly. And that Simon meant it.

Weeks before, even days before, Cody might have balked at binding himself to a vampire. The mating bond is for life, which means something entirely different when immortality is involved.

Tonight, a hundred lifetimes with Simon don't sound like enough.

"I'm sober now." Cody gently turns Simon to face him. "I love you, too, you beautiful brat."

Simon's bashfulness melts into a smirk. "You have excellent taste, wolf. Does the mating bond involve fucking?"

Impossible heat grips Cody by the balls. "That can be arranged."

Cody's hands tighten on Simon's waist, and Simon rocks down. Friction on his bare cock sparks a moan, quickly swallowed by Simon's lips. Simon kisses ravenously, rough and wet. Cody drinks just as deeply, meeting the sharp edges of teeth in kind.

Something like magic swirls beneath his skin, a building storm, but it has nothing to do with the mating bond or the moon's call. This is more primal than that. Instinctive, mundane need.

Cody grabs Simon by the hair. At the first tug, Simon melts, opening up to let Cody take control. Very much letting him. Simon's choice of submission fuels Cody's surging possessiveness. All his years of loneliness are worth it because they led him here.

Panting for breath, Cody breaks away to look at his vampire. Simon is still too poised, even with his hair mussed and his tank riding up his stomach. Cody needs to take him apart.

"Do you have lube down here?" Cody asks. Otherwise, he'll need to run upstairs, and thankfully he has the whole supernatural speed thing, but—

"Dresser in the closet, top drawer," Simon says, and leaps to his feet in a blur.

"Great." Cody jumps up and steals one more kiss. "I want you naked by the time I'm back."

"Don't dally," Simon murmurs, then shoves him towards the closet.

Cody moves faster than ever before.

This is his first time in Simon's bedroom—sorry, coffin room—but he can look around later. The closet is the size of Cody's apartment

kitchen, but otherwise normal. A moment's search turns up the lube.

He pauses involuntarily. There's something surreal about holding a plastic bottle he could have bought at any drugstore. So modern and ordinary, when he's on the verge of something life changing.

His neck throbs sweetly with the memory of Simon's teeth. Cody's about to bite Simon in return. To bind Simon to him, forever. Any sensible man would have doubts, but Cody has never been more certain. Simon belongs to him.

Cody has to pause again in the doorway, struck by the sight waiting for him.

Sitting on his coffin, Simon is more beautiful than ever. One foot props on the edge, exposing everything to Cody's hungry eyes. His blue-green eyes are darker, his hair a tousled mess across his pale forehead. Arousal radiates, the heady scent as obvious as the pink, hard cock jutting from its nest of curls.

Cody feels huge and animalistic in comparison, but the contrast is deceptive. Beneath Simon's pretty face is a ferocious strength. Simon threw him into a wall earlier tonight. Like it was easy.

Didn't feel great at the time. But Cody wouldn't mind a repeat under better circumstances.

"Took you long enough." Simon traces a finger from collar bone to hip, down the topography of slim muscles and flesh, and grasps his cock. "How do you want me, mate?"

The single syllable jolts Cody from his reverie. Three quick strides place him between Simon's cold thighs, and he seizes Simon by the chin. "Bent over your coffin," Cody growls. "So I can claim your neck as I fuck you."

"Delightful," Simon says, pushing his throat into Cody's grip. Then he shoves Cody away, making space to flip around.

The pedestal lifts the coffin not quite to waist height. When Simon bends over, his elbows rest on the dark wood. His back arches, and Cody moves as if magnetically pulled to the perfect, pale curves of Simon's ass.

Cody kneads into the muscle, squeezing, spreading. His thumb dips inward to nudge Simon's hole. At the touch, Simon tenses in palpable excitement. Cody pushes harder, his thumb huge against such a small pink furl, and a stronger tremor runs through Simon's body. So cold, but so responsive. Cody's the one sparking these reactions.

He's desperate to spark even more. To leave his mark on Simon, inside and out.

"Need you," Cody murmurs, fumbling with the bottle of lube.

"Of course you do," Simon says, with well-deserved arrogance.

Cody's fingers return dripping wet. He doesn't wait to push the first in, savoring the slick feel. Crowding closer as Simon pushes back, Cody's thighs press flush with Simon's. He braces one hand on the coffin lid and valiantly ignores the friction of his cock against Simon's ass. One more finger.

"Tell me when you're ready," Cody says, crooking downward, looking for—

"Now," Simon demands, clenching in reaction. "I can take your stupidly huge cock, so get on with it."

Cody's fingers are already out. "Going to take that as a compliment," he says, lining himself up.

Sliding in slowly takes every ounce of willpower. Simon can take him so well, but Cody needs to savor this moment. The way Simon's body warms around him, gripping him tighter, dragging him in. Cody inhales their combined scents and exhales in ragged pleasure. He revels in the tense line of Simon's neck, where the hair falls away.

Fully sheathed in his mate, Cody feels almost complete. He drops to his elbow to kiss the crest of Simon's spine.

"You're amazing," Cody says, lips brushing cold skin. "I'm so damned lucky."

Simon shivers. "You don't have to try so hard to seduce me."

Vulnerability lurks beneath the lightness. For all his age and experience, in some ways Simon has never gotten to grow past his frozen youth. He's too accustomed to empty praise and broken promises.

That ends tonight.

"Amazing *and* easy," Cody says, and starts to move. "Now I'm really lucky."

Fucking his mate soon unravels any semblance of control. Cody isn't a man holding his animal instincts on a leash. He's simply himself. Tight, precise movements devolve into a roughness that Simon meets with every thrust. Like they aren't separate beings anymore—except the perfect bond comes from their differences. Cody was born to fill Simon up with adoration.

He's so close already. Anticipation coils in his balls, winding throughout his body. His vision blurs until all he sees is Simon. Thin hands splintering the edge of the coffin. Head bowed, baring the back of his neck. All Cody hears is Simon's undead pulse quickening, almost a living pace.

Simon's scent is gorgeous. Old blood, new blood, cold and clean, ashes and moonlight. Intoxicating. Cody's jaw aches as his teeth grow in. No more fighting his wolf. Cody curls over Simon, down on one

elbow, barely holding himself up. His clawed fingers gently wind through Simon's hair.

"Last chance to back out," Cody says, unafraid of his instincts. He needs Simon to want this.

"That should be my line." Simon leans into Cody's grasp, stretching his neck in invitation. "Yes, Cody, please."

Cody's teeth sink in easily, where Simon's left shoulder meets his neck. Two voices rise in a shared moan of pleasure.

"Yes," Simon breathes again, and Cody's jaws tighten in response. Simon's rich, dark blood fills his mouth.

Eyes closed, shrouded in darkness but far from lost, Cody calls on his wolf. This is a transformation, too—of the spirit instead of the body. A sliver of moonlight dances between Cody and Simon, lacing them together.

A ribbon of red shadow follows, twisting ever tighter. The power of Simon's blood, granting its own gifts. Strength. Immortality. None of them as precious as the smallest hair on Simon's head.

When the bond settles, Cody will have everything he ever dreamed of. A pack to take refuge with. A mate to protect.

Most importantly, he'll have Simon, who's better than any dream. And he'll have him forever.

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Chapter 33

Simon

Simon has been bitten before. Lifetimes ago and an ocean away, he bared his throat for the promise of eternity. It was exhilarating. It was violent. Simon transformed, and for all that happened later, he doesn't regret accepting the shadow-gift. Not when it led him here.

Cody's bite is nothing like that memory. His teeth carve Simon's soul into its truest shape. Not transformative but ascendant. Simon arches into the pain, eyes rolling back with the pleasure. Tension he hadn't noticed resolves into white-hot bliss.

Loneliness burns away from his cold bones. To Dima, Simon was just the latest toy to play with before discarding. But Cody has chosen Simon above all others. This bite means Simon is special.

Simon isn't ashamed to need that anymore. He deserves a return on his devotion. His own gift to Cody is selfish, and he isn't ashamed of that either. The promise of eternity—together.

As the shock of connection eases, Simon revels in the physicality of the moment. The mingled scents of blood and sex. Stubble scrapes his shoulder, and Cody's thighs stick to the backs of Simon's. A drop of blood escapes Cody's lips and races down Simon's throat.

Each thrust drives Cody's heavy cock against Simon's prostate. Not all the sparks coursing through Simon's veins are magic. Cody growls, the sound reverberating through their joined bodies, and rolls his hips just right.

Simon's orgasm is almost an afterthought. He surrenders to ecstasy as Cody's teeth pierce deeper. Shuddering, overwhelmed with the binding, Simon collapses onto the coffin lid.

His pleasure-slack body soars as Cody—his mate—chases his own finish. Shallow, sloppy, precision lost along with composure. With one last thrust, Simon's guts tingle with the heat of Cody's release.

Cody slumps over him, a comforting, panting weight. His grip softens in Simon's hair. Simon loosens his own grip on the coffin lid with effort. He hadn't noticed the splinter pricks.

The sharper pain of Cody's unclenching jaw is welcome. Fangs shrink as they withdraw from Simon's skin. A wet kiss presses beneath

Simon's ear, before Cody's sweaty forehead rests on his shoulder.

Drops of blood tap the wood beneath him. Simon bleeds slowly by nature, but there will be a mess if he doesn't put pressure on the wound.

Making a mess sounds fine. As does Cody's substantial weight—Simon barely needs to breathe anyway. But the wooden edge digging into his thighs is painful in a less sexy way.

"I'm suffocating," Simon says, the complaint proving the lie.

"Sorry." Cody kisses his shoulder, then extricates himself from Simon's body. There's one aggravating second of absence before Simon straightens and stumbles into Cody's arms.

Simon's neck aches. Werewolves don't heal their bites like vampires, so Simon's own accelerated healing will have to do the work. The lingering evidence is almost as hot as Cody's gaze, dark with wonder, like Simon is something miraculous. Cody's lips, stained with Simon's blood. Cody's arms, strong around him.

Cody's soul, bound forever to his.

"You can feel it, too," Cody says, tracing the bite mark. His touch is tender. Worshipful.

"It's astounding." Simon is light yet solid, free yet bound. There shouldn't be any empathic element, yet he can't tell where his happiness ends and Cody's begins. Simon reaches to cover Cody's hand, pressing it into the bite. The bleeding has stopped, but the wound won't close until Simon sleeps. "Better than I imagined."

"Sorry about the scar," Cody says, not sounding sorry at all.

"I want the scar." Simon lifts on his toes to loop his arms around Cody's shoulders. "Nobody's left a mark on me in over four hundred years. How do you feel about that?"

"Nobody else ever will," Cody promises—easy, possessive, unafraid.

Simon already senses the changes in his mate. Stability from the mating bond. Strength from the shadow-gift. Cody won't have to shy from the sun, and he won't drink blood to survive. He'll just live as long as Simon lives.

Thankfully Cody likes the bratty thing. Simon intends to be a handful for eternity.

"Excellent." Simon pulls Cody down for a soft, bloody kiss. "Now, I need to sleep. It's almost dawn, and I'm quite elderly."

"All right, Grandpa," Cody says, the bastard. The gorgeous bastard. He sweeps Simon off his feet before he can complain about the nickname. Then Cody hesitates. "Uh, the coffin looks a little cramped, so…"

“Your bedroom,” Simon commands, settling his head against Cody’s shoulder. The guest room is still underground, and Simon trusts Cody to protect him during the day.

At least until they order a bigger coffin.

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Epilogue

Six Moons Later

Giant wolves make perfect backrests. Simon settles comfortably on the picnic blanket, supported by Cody's fluffy bulk. The waning moon paints their lawn in ethereal silver. Like a mural, and the finishing touch is laughter.

It's an odd sort of picnic. Only a few participants have actually eaten from the basket—Cody before he transformed, and the excitable humans Kimiko brought as snacks. The humans currently wander the garden under Andrea's cranky supervision, while Simon, Cody, and Kimiko lounge on the blanket.

Kimiko isn't dressed for a picnic, but she carries herself resplendently as ever. Tonight's corset is laced tight enough to be troublesome if she actually needed to breathe. Her red feather boa sparkles in the moonlight.

"Aren't you worried about fleas?" Kimiko asks, wrinkling her nose.

"It's very sexy when he gives me fleas," Simon lies, immediately and confidently. "We have a routine. First, we strip completely naked. Second, we sensually pick them off each—"

You're an idiot, Cody says in his head.

"He says I'm an idiot," Simon conveys dutifully. He's the only one who can hear Cody, thanks to the mating bond. It's only polite to include Kimiko in the conversation.

"You're right and you should say it." For all Kimiko's snark, she shows Cody the respect of addressing him directly. She reserves the friendly taunting for Simon. "Over a century of friendship, and this is the first time you've invited me to your house."

"I've only had this house for thirty years!" Simon protests.

Kimiko stares balefully above the feathers. "Thirty. Years."

That's longer than I've been alive, Cody adds unhelpfully.

Great. They're ganging up on him. Simon elbows Cody in the ribs. Gently. "Stop making me feel ancient."

"Ugh, cute couple telepathy." Kimiko feigns a shudder. "This is going to be insufferable."

Oh. Simon's lips curl in an involuntary smile. He and Cody can also gang up on her. There are perks to the mating bond.

Simon has always held friendship at a distance. Relationships are built of boundaries, favors, and debts. If even his sire could leave him for decades, how could Simon trust a friend without obligation?

But as long as he has someone to come home to, venturing out doesn't feel so frightening. Kimiko doesn't owe him any more favors, and maybe fostering more friendships is worth the risk.

"Any plans for tomorrow night?" Kimiko asks.

Fostering friendship doesn't mean being less obnoxious, though. "I think I'll stay in and get railed by a giant werewolf."

"Insufferable," Kimiko repeats, sheltering her eyes—as if she has any modesty left to preserve.

Maybe, Cody chimes in, his mental voice rumbly with amusement. *If you're a good boy.*

Simon musters a dramatic sigh. "I'm never a good boy."

"God, I need a drink." Kimiko sways gracefully to her feet, then wanders towards Andrea and the humans.

Her question about plans was fair. Tonight is the last night of Simon's house arrest—part of his sentence for covering up Lawrence's death. The killing itself was self-defense, as permitted by the treaty. Six months of house arrest is a slap on the wrist for a vampire, of course. More significantly, Simon owes the treaty council a favor.

He hates being indebted, but he doesn't mind this obligation. The council expects his help uncovering any more of Dima's co-conspirators. One has already been taken into custody—the witch who brewed the poisons that weakened Simon and drove Cody mad. The council also uncovered Dima's records on the hunter who killed Tania. A no-name hunter from a tiny guild that never knew one of theirs was responsible for the ensuing chaos.

As for Dima's enthrallment victims, Erica and Lawrence's families have been compensated from Dima's estate. The parts of the estate the council has found so far, anyway.

Tobias is doing better than Simon expected. Then again, he took 'my college roommate is a werewolf' in stride, so maybe that shouldn't be so surprising. Cody visited him, Aditi, Princess, and the new baby for a weekend last month. Their friendship seems stronger with Cody taking a perhaps permanent leave from Atwood Security.

That weekend was surprisingly free of the despair Simon always felt when Dima left. Near-constant text messages and calls helped. As did the way Cody more than made up for the trip afterwards. But most of all, Simon trusted Cody would return.

I have a surprise for you, Cody says now, in the serene moonlight.

Simon curls around, resting his cheek on Cody's plush shoulder. "What is it?"

It's a surprise. I brought it in while you were sleeping today. Cody's mental pause fills with wordless wickedness. *Maybe you can wear it out sometime, now that your house arrest is over.*

Intriguing. "Is it lingerie? Lace is fine, but I don't like thongs."

Cody falls silent, contemplative. *Not lingerie, but that's good to know*.

Simon jumps to his feet and calls out to Kimiko. "We'll be right back! Behave yourself!"

"I won't!" Kimiko calls in reply.

Inside the house, Cody's massive wolf form crowds the hallways. Simon isn't surprised by how much he likes that anymore. Cody's dark gray bulk is reassuring. Comfortable. Kind of sexy. Cody has spent more time as a wolf these past few months, as the security of the mating bond settles in. His relief is so apparent, Simon sometimes wishes they had bonded earlier, so Cody didn't have to suffer as long.

Not that they'd waited very long at all, Cody often points out.

To Simon's surprise, Cody leads him to the guest room. The one that was Cody's, before they moved both a bigger coffin and an actual bed downstairs. Simon hasn't entered this room in weeks, which explains why he didn't notice the white cardboard box on the bed.

Cody nudges Simon's arm. *Open it.*

Simon ruffles Cody's head first. Then he peels away layers of rustling tissue paper.

The leather hits his nose before his fingers reach the buttery softness. The jacket is well worn, its straps and buttons instantly familiar. Almost identical to the jacket that was ruined when Cody got shot.

More than almost identical.

"This is your jacket," Simon says.

The air twists in Simon's peripheral vision. A moment later, Cody's naked human form surrounds Simon from behind. "It's your jacket now," Cody says, lips hot against Simon's ear. "I had it cleaned and got the lining replaced."

Simon lifts the jacket as strong arms wind around his waist. Sure enough, the plain lining has been replaced with bright red fabric—patterned with little black bats. A patch covers the bullet hole in the upper arm—a gray wolf howling in front of a moon.

The jacket is still sized for Cody's larger frame, but it's been styled for both of them.

“I want to see you wear it,” Cody says, in a voice that makes Simon want to strip naked instead of putting more clothes on. Possessiveness radiates from every breath and touch.

“Is this a gift for me, or for you?” Simon asks.

“Yes,” Cody answers shamelessly.

Simon can be shameless, too. He pushes the jacket into Cody’s hands. “Then put it on me yourself.”

Cody growls into Simon’s hair and obeys. Each confident touch covers Simon more completely than the jacket itself. The silk lining is comfortable, the baggy weight perfect for lounging in. Styling plans are already taking shape. Simon could pair the jacket with his red leather pants or stupefy Cody with short shorts and fishnets.

A kiss heats Simon’s neck, right where the bond mark gleams. The silver scar is sensitive. Simon isn’t sure which of them likes the proof of Cody’s claim more. Like the jacket, the scar makes Simon feel treasured. Wanted. Protected.

“Can I drink from you tonight?” Simon asks, nuzzling into Cody’s neck.

Cody’s breath hitches. His cock hardens against Simon’s backside. “My blood is yours, sweetheart.”

Simon has broken all his personal rules for Cody. No first-timers. No repeats. No werewolves. But sometimes healing means breaking free of old habits. Eternity looks brighter with Cody at his side.

***

If you wanted to see Simon in lingerie… so did Cody! Read the bonus scene for free via my newsletter at tavialark.com/list.

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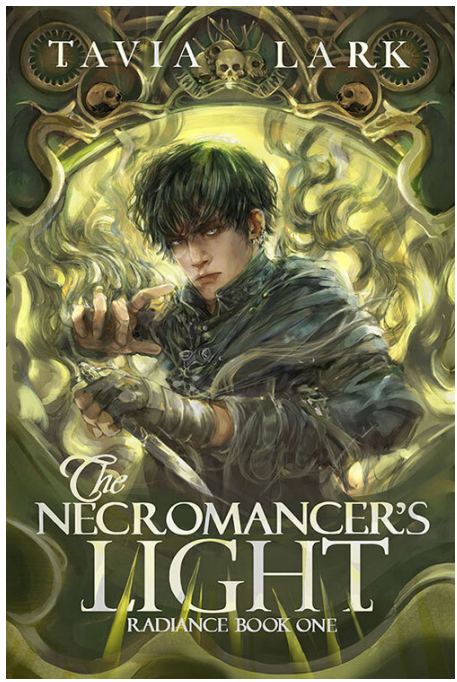

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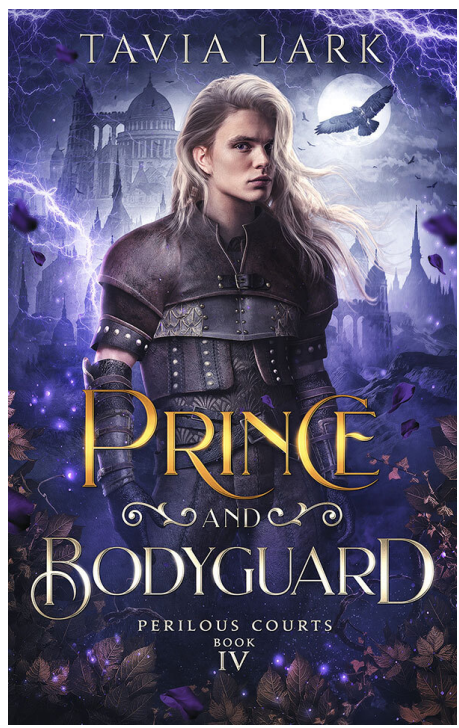

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About Tavia Lark

Tavia Lark writes MM fantasy romance about sad magic boys falling in love. Her favorite tropes include hurt/comfort, only one bed, and emotionally significant jackets. Like a vampire, she enjoys long walks at night to avoid the sun's baleful gaze.

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